LOTR: A VISIT TO MIDDLE-EARTH

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REALMS OF FANTASY

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Rock and Roll Magic
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THE DRAGONMASTER

FEBRUARY 2002

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Death Trip 2001

Made friends, made enemies, and almost died ~can't wait to go back!

Me battling vile olthoi insects in Marae Lassel

~ claw from nearly lost arm

My millionth pyreal coin—ah... the joy of being a monarch

Note to Self: Olthoi breed deadlier than last month

gauze from wound on nearly lost arm

My house, Southern Osteth

Dusk lily from my 2nd trip to Marae Lassel

purchased in March

Weapons stored here:
~Quiddity Sword
~Pyreal Axe

My precious focusing stone allows me to, well, focus.

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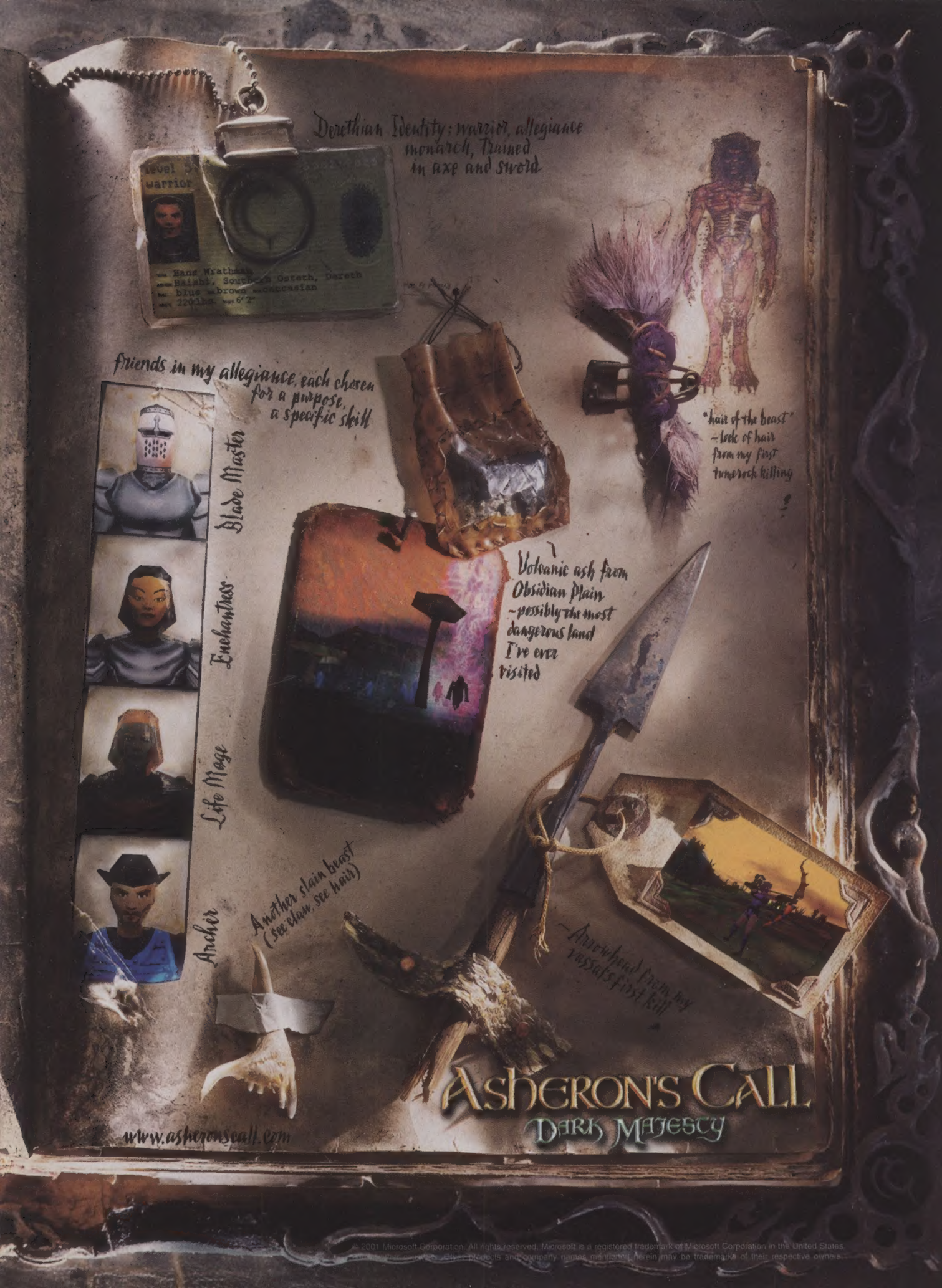
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level 5
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Bane Wrathbane
Baishi, Southern Osteth, Dareth
blue brown Caucasian
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Archer
"hair of the beast" - lock of hair from my first tumerock killing
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THE LORD OF THE RINGS
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RIGHT: Dragonflight *by Donato Giancola, who is featured in this issue's gallery.*

COVER: Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood) and his fellow hobbits, Sam (Sean Astin), Pippin (Billy Boyd), and Merry (Dominic Monaghan) travel to the Crack of Doom to destroy the ring.

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REALMS OF FANTASY (ISSN 1078-1951) is published bimonthly by Sovereign Media Co., Inc., 11305 Sunset Hills Rd., Reston VA 20190 (703) 471-1556. Periodical Rate postage paid at Herndon, VA, and additional mailing offices. REALMS OF FANTASY, Volume 8, Number 3 © 2001 by Sovereign Media, all rights reserved. Copyrights to stories and illustrations are the property of their creators. The contents of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without consent of the copyright owner. *Subscription Services, back issues, and information* call 800-219-1187 or write to REALMS OF FANTASY **P.O. Box 1623, Williamsport, PA 17703.** Single copies: $4.00, plus $1 for postage to Sovereign Media. Yearly subscription in U.S.A.: $16.95; Canada and Overseas: $21.95 (U.S.). Send editorial mail to REALMS OF FANTASY, **P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760.** REALMS OF FANTASY welcomes editorial submissions but assumes no responsibility for the loss or damage of unsolicited material. Material to be returned should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. We suggest that you send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Sovereign Media for our author's guidelines. **POSTMASTER: Send address changes to REALMS OF FANTASY, P.O. Box 1623, Williamsport, PA 17703.**

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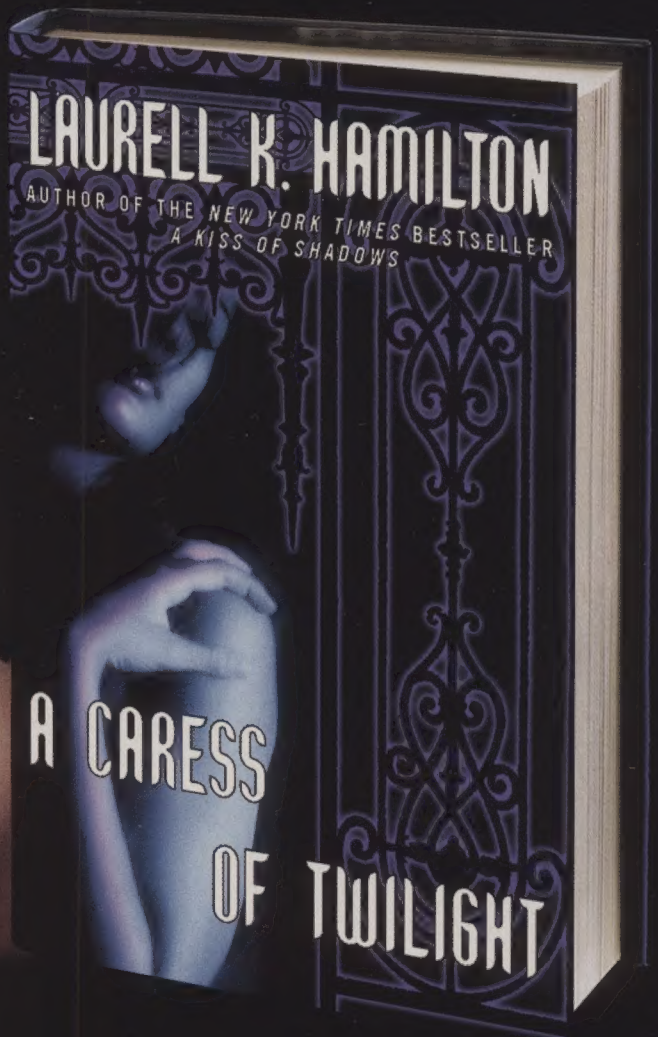

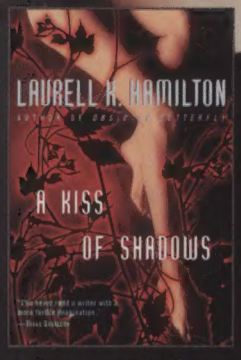

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Living in a fantasy world

As I write, it's been a little over a month since the world changed around us, and I haven't gotten used to living in this alternate universe yet. I now live in a land where some 6,000 people lie pulverized in a mass grave, where death comes in the mail, and where enemies live among us in disguise, plotting nefarious deeds. I live in a land where the forces of darkness are sweeping over the countryside and where people of good will seem unable to stop it. In short, I seem to be living in Narnia or Middle-Earth, and to tell the truth, I don't like it one bit.

One of fantasy's enduring charms was that Evil would always be overcome. Sure there would be dramatic battles, and beloved characters might die, but we always knew that Good would conquer Evil and all would be well in the end. Real life has come as a great shock to me. There's no writer at the other end of this book—no one who knows in advance which characters will die and which will live, which cities will fall and which will stand. We can't flip to the end to see how it will all come out. People say, "It's like a movie," but in point of fact, it's far more like a book. A very scary book with lots of sequels no one wants to read but everyone has to.

So how can we, as fantasy readers, writers, and fans, try to cope with the world we find ourselves in? Well, I believe we have a head start in at least knowing the landscape. Granted we don't have access to magical spells to turn our foes into frogs, or to toss spheres of magical energy at them, and nothing will be solved by finding the ring or rescuing the sword. But at least we know the language, and I think we can navigate the mental terrain a little better than someone who has never visited here before. And one of the lasting lessons in all good fantasy is that love, faith, and courage can overcome enormous obstacles. While some may say, "Well, that's why they call it *fantasy,*" I think that in our hearts we believe it more than most. We were the ones who clapped madly to keep Tinkerbell alive, and we know in our hearts that somewhere, somehow, magic does, it *must,* exist. So love your kids, your families, your neighbors. Face each day with steel in your soul and faith in your heart. Thank a firefighter. Shake a policeman's hand. Roast some chestnuts. Kiss a baby. Say the Pledge of Allegiance. And maybe, just maybe, we'll find the wellspring of magic that we all know lives in the heart of this land. ❧

Shawna McCarthy

REALMS OF FANTASY
VOLUME 8 NUMBER 3

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DEALER INQUIRES ARE WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

The Fellowship of the Ring brings Tolkien's Middle-Earth to life.

Many years ago I fell asleep during a college-campus showing of Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy—which actually covers only the first two-thirds of the trilogy, reportedly because Bakshi ran out of money. Like many people, I'd read Tolkien's masterpiece when I was in high school. I wanted to see the story come to life on screen. But animation didn't do the trick. The characters felt flat and distant. The scenery didn't come close to how I'd imagined the landscapes in my head when I read Tolkien's books. It was impossible to stay awake.

But earlier this year, I had the opposite reaction to the first trailer for New Line Cinema's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, scheduled for a December 19 release. Like many people, I'd heard the buzz for a long time—all three movies that make up the trilogy were shot back-to-back, and they'll be released near Christmas in 2001, 2002, and 2003. But nothing I'd heard prepared me for what I saw. I was riveted as I watched images of Middle-Earth unfold. And then, finally, at the very end of the trailer, I heard the unmistakable voice of Gollum whisper, "My precious."It literally sent a chill down my spine.

If you're new to Tolkien's work, or if it's been a while since you've read it, here's a quick recap. *The Fellowship of the Ring* centers on the hobbit Frodo Baggins, who lives among his friends Sam, Merry, and Pippin in Hobbiton in the fantasy land of Middle-Earth, where humans are a new race among many old ones. Frodo has inherited a ring from his uncle, Bilbo Baggins. When the wizard Gandalf arrives, Frodo learns the story of how his uncle acquired the ring—and that it's an object offering great power and great temptation to its current owner. The previous owner of the ring was a hobbit named Smeagol, who's been so corrupted by it that he's a deformed and twisted version of what and who he used to be. He's now known as Gollum, and he calls the ring "Precious." Once the decision is made that the ring must be destroyed, Frodo volunteers to take it to the one place where it can be destroyed: the Crack of Doom, the site at which it was originally forged. Frodo is joined on his journey by his hobbit friends and a wide variety of companions.

As a powerful wizard, Saruman (Christopher Lee) has a horde of orcish minions at his disposal.

John Rhys-Davies (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* and TV's *Sliders*) plays the dwarf Gimli, one of the heroes who travel with the Frodo. Rhys-Davies describes the experience of making the three movies: "The most

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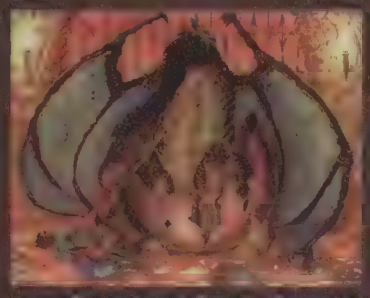

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extraordinary and enchanting experience of my life, I think. I have never worked on a production where everyone has been so completely enthusiastic, in sync, passionate about a project for such a long period of time. Brilliantly cast, brilliantly directed, brilliant recension of the script. A wonderful and marvelous experience—and thank God I don't have to go do it all again."

The Lord of the Rings may be the most ambitious motion picture project in history. Typically, a major motion picture is likely to be shot in two to three months, while an independent film is often shot in half that time or less. Therefore, the three films that make up *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy required 274 days of shooting. Simply to endure the shooting schedule, every actor had to show up in top physical shape. "We all started fitness programs well before production began," says British actor Dominic Monaghan, who plays the hobbit Merry Brandybuck. "And we worked with physical trainers throughout."

Rhys-Davies describes the physical challenge of his role as Gimli. "I remember once, sitting halfway up a hill with quite a bit of altitude, and watching two men carrying a box up with my costume and armor in it, and another two guys coming up with the axes, and a woman coming up with my rather heavy helmet, and another woman coming up the hill with my rather heavy boots. They put it all on me, and Peter Jackson said, 'OK, now, John, I want you to run.'"

In fact, director Peter Jackson (*Heavenly Creatures*, *The Frighteners*) didn't simply ask others to give it their all. Jackson himself put enormous effort into staying true to Tolkien's work. "I started with one goal," Jackson says. "To take moviegoers into the fantastical world of Middle-Earth in a way that is believable and powerful. I wanted to take all the great moments from the books and use modern technology to give audiences nights at the movies unlike anything they've experienced before.

"I've spent seven years of my life on this project so far, pouring my heart into every single aspect of it. But I think that's the least we owe to Tolkien and the legions of fans around the globe. They deserve our very best efforts."

Jackson co-wrote the scripts with writers Fran Walsh (*The Frighteners*) and new screenwriter Philippa Boyens over the course of nearly three years. They constantly referred to Tolkien's books when writing and during production. "Every time we shot a scene, I reread that part of the book right before, as did the cast," Jackson says. "It was always worth it, always inspiring."

To design the world of Middle-Earth, the filmmakers hired conceptual artists Alan Lee and John Howe, who illustrated the HarperCollins editions of *The Lord of the Rings*. Lee and Howe produced hundreds of sketches of the books' various cultures, creatures, buildings, and landscapes that served as a springboard for the creation of storyboards, miniature sets, and full-scale sets. Sixty-four of the miniature sets were filmed, some of which are the most complex ever rendered. One of the miniature sets in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is the forest kingdom of Lothlorien, made up of tree houses connected by walkways and lit with fairy lights. Keep your eyes open, too, for Khazad-Dum, the land of the dwarves.

Production designer Grant Major says of Lee and Howe, "Their contribution to the project was absolutely fundamental. They gave us the look and feel of Middle-Earth, and they brought the most intimate knowledge of Tolkien lore to their work."

The filmmakers took great care in how they approached each race in Tolkien's world: hobbits, elves, dwarves, wizards, men, ents, orcs, and ringwraiths. This included the design of sets, costumes, and fighting styles for the different races—and even an entire new language, which was created for the elves.

For example, the sets for Rivendell are intended to show how the Elvish culture is highly artistic, as well as connected to nature. Major says, "We used a leaf motif throughout the sets, and used a lot of hard-carved statues, pillars, and door frames. Even the colors are right out of the forest. We even added Art Nouveau-style influences that reflect their elegant nature."

The goal of costume designer Ngila Dickson (TV's *Hercules* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*), along with her team of 50 tailors, embroiderers, cobblers, and jewelers, was to make every costume lifelike, functional, and reflective of each character. Designing clothing for hobbits was especially challenging. "When you have little fellows running around in frock coats and short trousers, you have to work to make that believable, but Peter was quite clear that he wanted them to look as real as possible."

To accomplish the task, Dickson strove to make the clothes reflect the atmosphere of Hobbiton. She used natural fabrics, strong weaves, and harvest colors. "I added a lot of quirks, things to jar the eye. Their trouser legs and sleeves are too short, their buttons are too big, and their collars are out of proportion. I even made their pockets higher than usual, for example, so when they put their hands in their pockets, it has a very distinctive, funny look to us."

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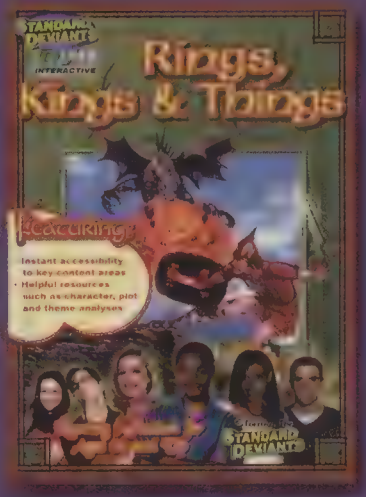
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Gimli (John Rhys-Davies) and Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) ally themselves with Frodo and the other hobbits to help defeat the Lord of Mordor.

Actor Viggo Mortensen (*G.I. Jane*, *Portrait of a Lady*), who plays Aragorn, literally took his costume into his own hands before filming began. Because Aragorn is a man who has spent years wandering in the wilderness, his costume had to reflect his rugged life. Mortensen did the aging of the costume himself. Dickson says, "He took his outfit home with him, because he wanted to literally grow into it. He sweat in it, lived in it, even repaired it himself, as Aragorn would have. That's the best you can hope for in making costumes: that the actors will participate and make them their own, a part of their character."

Different fighting styles were designed for each race by the world's top sword master, Bob Anderson (*Star Wars*), who is an expert in medieval arms. Anderson began by reading Tolkien's books. He then used Tolkien's descriptions of each culture to develop a sparring technique that is specific and unique to each race. For example, Anderson decided that hobbits should fight as a team, because they're so small.

And then there's the Elvish language. Although it's based in part on Celtic, it's a unique language that dialect and creative language coaches Andrew Jack and Roisin Carty developed specifically for *The Lord of the Rings*. Jack and Carty took the approach of teaching the actors this new Elvish language from scratch instead of just having them memorize their lines from the script.

The Elvish language has its own accent and cadence. Jack and Carty trained the actors in other dialects. Actors performed language exercises in front of mirrors, which included making various faces and noises. They learned to use the muscles in their faces in completely new ways. The result? The actors found their own accents spontaneously.

Cate Blanchett (*Elizabeth* and *The Gift*) plays Galadriel, an Elf Queen. Blanchett says, "By the time I started working, there was such a strong and real-life sense of the various cultures, their histories, and their hopes for the future. It was really like becoming part of a whole different universe. I've never experienced anything like it before."

Casting a movie that's based on a well-loved novel is always a dicey proposition at best. Anyone who's read the novel has already envisioned what the characters look like. In this case, the cast had to be willing to spend more than nine months shooting in New Zealand—plus the ability to show character change over the course of three movies. The filmmakers chose Elijah Wood (*The Ice Storm* and *Deep Impact*) to play Frodo. Producer Barrie M. Osborne (*The Matrix* and *Face/Off*) says, "Elijah has a sincerity of purpose that just makes him a natural in the role. He is capable of taking the character through a real transformation, which begins with *The Fellowship of the Ring*."

Wood talks about his experience portraying Frodo. "He became alive for me. The way we shot this movie, everything was so real that we believed that Frodo and the others really existed in history. Once I had my prosthetic ears and feet for the first time, I knew what it was to feel like a hobbit. It sounds bizarre, but it felt the same as playing a historical character, as if hobbits had actually once been alive."

Another key decision was casting Sir Ian McKellen (*X-Men* and *Gods and Monsters*) as Gandalf. "I see Gandalf as the archetypal wizard," McKellen says. "I think in the creation of Gandalf, Tolkien was playing with ideas about wizards from stories and fairy tales throughout time. Gandalf is related to Merlin, and maybe even Prospero, but he also is very much his own man."

And perhaps the most chilling character, Gollum, while voiced by Andy Serkis (*Topsy Turvy*), is a digital creation. WETA Digital (a branch of New Zealand's finest physical effects company, WETA Limited) created ground-breaking effects for *The Lord of the Rings*. WETA's Richard Taylor says, "I think that Gollum may be one of the most sophisticated digital creations seen yet. Throw out all your old ideas about what CG looks like, because Gollum defies them."

"WETA developed vast amounts of code to create Gollum," Jackson says. "They developed new modeling codes, new skin codes, new muscle codes. He is amazingly lifelike, and we were able to give him a range of expressions from the evil of Gollum to the sympathy of Smeagol."

But don't hold your breath. It looks like audiences won't get a good look at Gollum until the second film, *The Two Towers*, is released in December 2002.

At the heart of the story is Frodo's struggle with the ring he bears. The temptation for the power offered by the ring is strong, and Frodo's journey is as much within himself as across the landscape of Middle-Earth. *The Fellowship of the Ring* centers on the group of friends and strangers who accompany Frodo on his journey to take the ring to the place

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where it can be destroyed, and how a bond of friendship forms as they travel.

Rhys-Davies talks about the role that Gimli, the dwarf, plays in this band of heroes. "I think in some ways Gimli is less corrupted by the ring and less tempted by the ring than almost any of the others. The ring brings out the bad side in everybody. As the journey goes on, the pressure on Frodo is enormous. Gimli, in a curious way, from the time that he tries to smash the ring at the council of Elrond—when people said this is the ring and it's got to be destroyed, and he leaps up and swings his ax, and he ends up on the floor because the ring destroys his ax—at that point, he's saying, 'Wow. This is a pretty formidable thing. I thought I could end the whole damn thing now and stop this nonsense now just by a straight bit of dwarf bravery and showing the rest of the guys how to do it.'

"In a way, from then on, he's like a good NCO—noncommissioned officer—in the sense that he accepts the mission that the ring has to be destroyed, and he will be part of that mission initially because he doesn't want the dwarves to be left out because he's pretty damn sure there's some mischief going on. In his own way, he's very uncorrupted by it. He doesn't desire it. He doesn't want to carry it. He doesn't want to wear it. He's a more straightforward creature. These are the things he hates: he hates goblins, he hates orcs, he hates Uruk-Hai. He's not completely fearless, but to all practical intents and purposes, he would sooner die in battle doing the right thing and preserving dwarven honor than running away. The strategy of avoiding this conflict is irksome to him. 'Let's get on with it. You've got an evil there, let's take an ax to it.' There's a great charm and a great innocence in that sense. It's very curious that he's not really as tempted as others are, like Boromir, for instance."

As they journey through Middle-Earth, they eventually come to the Elf city of Galadhrim. In Tolkien's book, it's a place that is strictly off-limits to dwarves—and, therefore, to Gimli.

"It's a very dangerous moment, as far as Gimli's concerned, because all his hackles are rising, and there is some animosity between the elves and the dwarves," Rhys-Davies says. "I think there's probably a slight difference in the tone. I think the elves are somewhat more virtuous and really have a higher vision of what's going on. I think we treat it more as Gimli's paranoia and perceived prejudice.

"Obviously, it's the point at which Gimli himself integrates more into the group. I think he always trusts Strider. He feels very protective toward the hobbits. He's sort of OK with men, though at the council of Elrond, he and the dwarven people really think the whole thing is some sort of bloody setup by the elves for their advantage. But once he actually meets the witch herself—the queen of the elves, that great enchantress who can destroy men's lives—then he falls instantly, totally in love with her. And from that point on, his relation with Legolas changes quite dramatically, though they're still rivals in the sense of fighting rivals. It's a pivotal movement in the fermenting of the relationship of the fellowship."

Ironically, the release of *The Fellowship of the Rings* comes at a period in history where Tolkien's themes seem especially relevant.

"I just did a little film interview as part of a tribute to George Lucas," Rhys-Davies says. "And in it I say, 'George, I do see that some of the more intellectual critics were condescending toward your last *Star Wars*. And part of it is because they're too sophisticated to believe in good and evil.' And, of course, good and evil do exist.

"This film is completely attuned to the zeitgeist of the moment. We are faced with a passionate evil.

"There are parallels, obviously, between the struggle against good and evil—because *Lord of the Rings* comes out of the Second World War, and Tolkien's experience of the First World War—there are obvious parallels now between this great time of cultural crisis that we have and a crisis that will actually examine the very core of how we relate to other people. *Lord of the Rings* is relevant to that.

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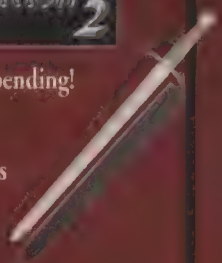

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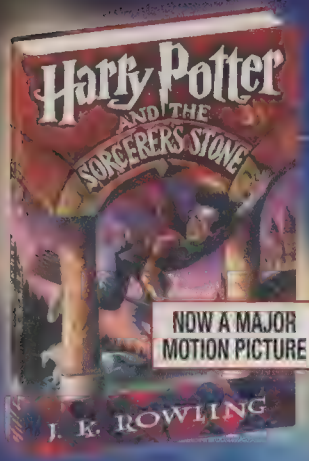

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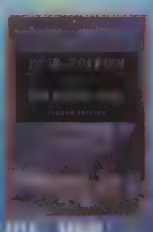

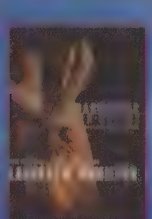

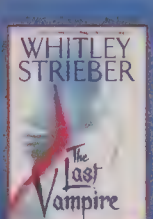

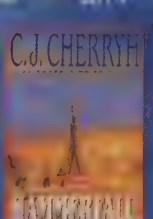

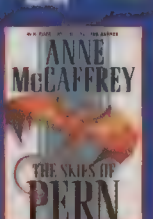

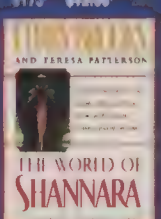

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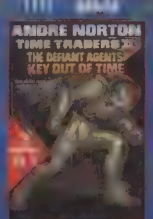

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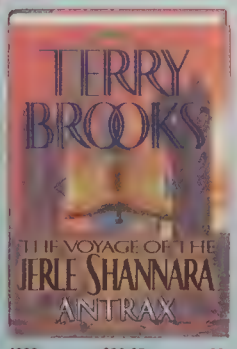

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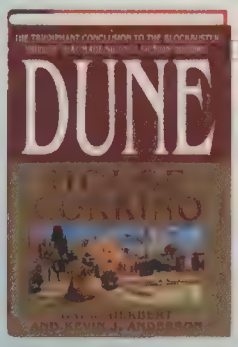

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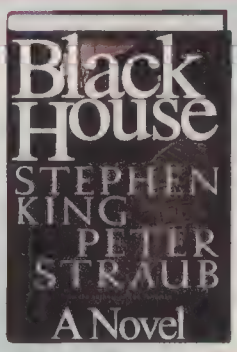

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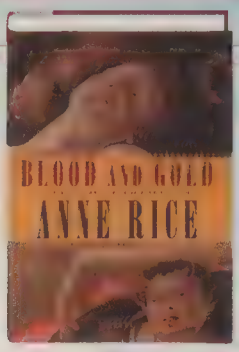

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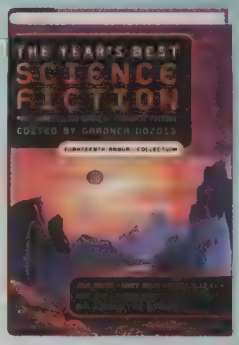

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By Heinz Insu Fenkl

The literary vampire was born on a dark and stormy night in 1816.

My dear it is splendid, a thousand miles beyond anything you have written before.... No book since Mrs. Shelley's 'Frankenstein' or indeed any other at all has come near yours in originality, or terror... ."

—Bram Stoker's mother, Charlotte Stoker, referring to *Dracula*

A Dark and Stormy Night

It seems hardly necessary to ruminate about the vampire these days, since it is a solid fixture in all the media of popular culture. Between the kids' breakfast cereal and the fringe groups that actually consume human blood and consider themselves *real* vampires, the symbol has pretty much run the gamut of expression. The general consumer of 21st-century culture is so familiar with vampire lore that what once required the specialized arcane knowledge of quirky experts like Montague Summers and equally quirky fictional ones like Abraham Van Helsing has become rather tedious to endure on screen and in books. Nearly all cultures have their vampires, but Americans have, in a sense, begun to take the vampire for granted; in pop culture, its arch nemesis, the figure of Buffy the Vampire Slayer has become a solidly mainstream (arguably) feminist icon.

Greg Hildebrandt illustrated a 1985 edition of Bram Stoker's Dracula *with paintings such as* Lust of the Undead, *shown here.*

It was not always this way. On a dark and stormy night in June of 1816 in Lord Byron's villa in Geneva, a fateful company was gathered: Percy Shelley, the great Romantic poet; Mary Shelley, his wife; Claire Clairmont, her stepsister; Lord Byron, the notorious poet celebrity; and John Polidori, his "personal physician." Mary Shelley was only 18 at the time, and the oldest of the company, Lord Byron, was only 28. (Polidori, at 21, was remarkably young to be playing doctor.) The romantic and sexual intrigues that linked these figures is the stuff of the most lurid soap operas, but despite (and perhaps directly because of) who was sleeping with whom, who was pregnant by whom, and who was betraying whom under the rubric of "free love," that night spawned two of the most enduring works of English literature: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and, less directly, through a long continuation of the soap opera and its psychodynamics, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* more than three quarters of a century later (1897).

That fateful night was inspired by Lord Byron, who proposed that each of the company write a ghost story in the tradition of the German horror tales they had been reading in a French collection called *Les Fantasmagoriana.* Mary Shelley later recalled:

"The noble author [Byron] began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa.... Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a keyhole—what to see I forget—something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her, and was obliged to despatch her to the tomb of the Capulets...."

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That Mary Shelley eventually wrote *Frankenstein* is the topic of another column; what I want to focus on here is the figure of the literary vampire we recognize today, which came into being rather inauspiciously as an intrigue between Lord Byron and John Polidori.

Poor Polidori's story was never finished (a shame, because it seems to have been a thinly veiled commentary on the lurid goings-on at the villa—one wonder what keyholes he was peeking through), but from his journals, we have details about the story Byron also began but did not finish. Its plot seems as thinly veiled as Polidori's, though as a wishful commentary on his own life: Two friends are traveling in Greece where one of them dies, making the other swear that he will tell no one the strange events leading to his death. Later, back in England, the survivor sees his dead companion alive and well.

In April of 1819, a short story called "The Vampyre," attributed to Lord Byron, appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine*. It became an immediate success; it was lavishly praised by Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe (philosopher and poet, author of *Faust*) and it was quickly translated into French. In the following month, the *New Monthly Magazine* included a piece by John Polidori in which he described the origins of "The Vampyre," reasoning that the story was written by himself, but attributed to Byron since it was based on notes that Polidori had taken at Byron's villa. Byron, after getting wind of the fraud, tried to halt further exploitation of his name, but the publisher later released the story separately as a small novel, still attributing it to Byron.

It never became clear why Polidori participated in this deception (though it is probably in part due to the fact that Byron's name made it the first vampire best-seller). Some scholars suggest that it was a misunderstanding between Polidori and the publisher, that he never meant to put Byron's byline on it; but it may very well have been a way for Polidori, a literary wannabe infatuated with Byron, to exact some sort of revenge on his former friend (and probable lover) by stealing Byron's aborted idea and transforming it—by casting Byron himself as the main character—into another veiled confessional tale.

In France the following year, Cyprien Berard wrote a novella that continued the story of Polidori's vampire, Lord Ruthven, in *Lord Ruthwen ou Les Vampires*. Not long afterward, dramatizations of Polidori's story began to run with great success on the Paris stage. Even Alexandre Dumas, the great French luminary writer (most familiar to us for *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*) wrote of Lord Ruthven as late as 1852.

"The Vampyre" was hailed as a masterpiece, but Poor Polidori, as if to illustrate the nickname that Byron and the Shelleys had put on him, committed suicide in 1821 by taking poison. Whatever the truth of "The Vampyre's" publication, Byron's wrath had taken its toll,

Cover illustration for a 1901 abridged edition of Bram Stoker's Dracula.

and Polidori failed miserably as both writer and physician. He had no way of knowing that he had, through his betrayal of his friend and former lover, spawned the literary vampire, a figure that would long outlive any of them. In literature, the figure known as "The Byronic Hero" has eclipsed his namesake. Byron, ironically, would die in Greece, just like Lord Ruthven (whose name, incidentally, recalled the tragedy of Caroline Lamb, who also died ruined, having embarrassed her entire family with her relentless, near pathological, pursuit of Byron; in her novel *Glenarvon*, she had created Ruthven as a jibe against him).

Thus, the literary vampire, in a poetic fulfillment of the Transylvanian folk belief, is born out of a kind of illegitimacy and suicide—a convoluted form of plagiarism and literary character assassination punctuated by the suicide of its author. And since its inauspicious genesis, like its various folk predecessors, the literary vampire has had no rest.

Varney and Carmilla

Between Lord Ruthven and Dracula, there were two major vampire narratives: the frenetic and bloated *Varney the Vampire or The Feast of Blood* and the elegantly gothic "Carmilla." Varney, by James Malcolm Rymer (though some argue that the author was Thomas Preskett Prest), is a truly horrific work in every sense of the word. It is not only longer than *War and Peace*, but is written in the cliché-ridden penny-a-word style of a classic hack. It is actually a rather fine example of the 19th-century genre called the "Penny Dreadful." For example, in the compilation (published in 1847), which had originally appeared over the course of two years and two months in weekly installments, one has to endure full-length summaries of novels which the *characters* are reading, and this no doubt because the author had no plot for that week and simply filled in the story with something he had written earlier.

Varney does not warrant discussion for its literary qualities, but it does present a relentless and redundant spectrum of nearly all the elements that have become familiar vampire clichés. What distinguishes *Varney* is that under his curse, the vampire is a noble soul, and in the end he kills himself by leaping into the volcano, Mt. Vesuvius, figuratively sending himself directly to Hell.

Far more elegant is Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1872), which was a sort of prose re-rendition of William Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816). Although the vampirism in "Carmilla" serves mostly as thinly veiled depiction of lesbian sexuality as in "Christabel," Le Fanu's story introduced several themes that were later to appear in *Dracula*. Stoker researched vampire lore obsessively for several years before he finally wrote *Dracula*, which means he found reference to the same themes elsewhere, but it is likely that Le Fanu's story, along with Polidori's, served to create or fuel his obsession.

Carmilla is a shapeshifter, and she can leave her coffin without disturbing her grave; she inhabits the area around an abandoned castle; she is staked through the heart and decapitated in accordance with the vampire lore later found in *Dracula*. One peculiarity about the vampire in "Carmilla" is that she can only use names that are anagrams of one another. "Carmilla" is "Mirallca" is "Mircalla"; it is a rather transparent literary device for creating dramatic irony, since the reader notices this detail long before the characters make sense of it. Although other writers did not use this particular rule regarding their vampires, it illustrates a larger principle one finds in major works to follow. This literary trick, along with the 19th-century penchant for foreshadowing characterization through names, a technique that uses names as a sort of physiognomy, may also have given Stoker some ideas for how to convey meaning beneath the surface of *Dracula*.

Polidori was not a very clever writer (as one can see from the fact that he borrowed "The Vampyre" from Byron and the character's name from Caroline Lamb), but the names in "Carmilla" and "Christabel" are quite charged. The innocent girl in Coleridge's poem is named Christabel, which is a combination of Christ and Abel, two biblical descendants of Adam, both unjustly murdered. The vampire's name is Geraldine, suggesting a doubly ancient quality—"Ger" as in the prefix to "geriatric" and "ald" as Old English for "old"; she is described as "lean and old and foul of hue." In "Carmilla," the victim's name is Laura, from "L'Aura," a reference to light. The old castle in the story is Karnstein, which comes from the root "Carn," found in both "carnage" and "carnivore," suggesting slaughter and flesh eating. "Karn" also sounds like "cairn," which is a grave mound. (Although Le Fanu probably did not intend it, "Carmilla" can also be rearranged into "Ill Carma" or a diseased karma, which the vam-

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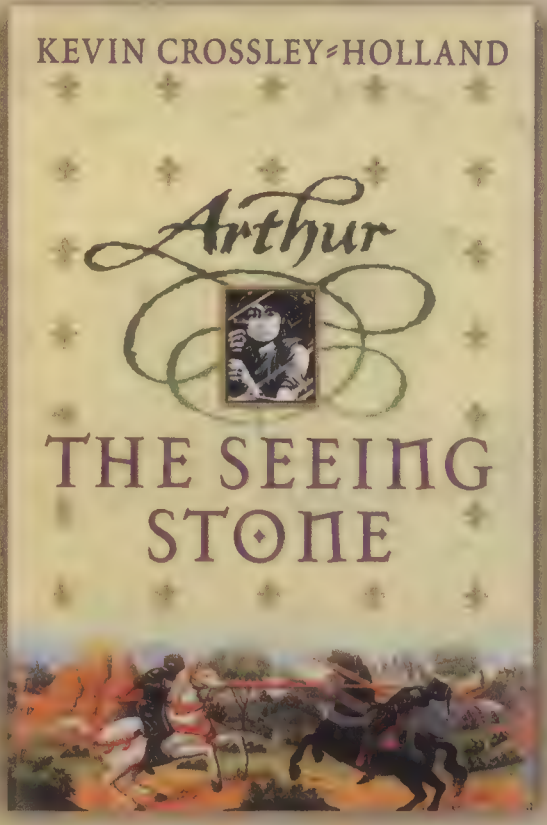

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pire certainly possesses.)

Bram Stoker would take both the background of the vampire and its power as a subliminal symbol to an as yet unmatched level of sophistication. It is not yet clear what drove him to such obsessive lengths (the biographical explanations are still inadequate), but the result combined all of the sordid biographical events around "The Vampyre" with all of the subliminal and psychosexual elements of "Carmilla" and then amplified them with the frenetic pacing of *Varney*. Stoker also performed his own ingenious wordplay that heightened his work's effects on the readers' unconscious. What he created was *Dracula*.

Dracula the Shadow

I need not recount the plot of *Dracula* here, since it is one of those universally known stories. Although the novel differs, often profoundly, from the movie renditions, a memory of the film plots will suffice for my discussion. If you haven't read the novel, I recommend it highly—it's a page-turner even by contemporary standards, remarkably ahead of its time in terms of dramatic structure. But the action/suspense plot is not what ultimately distinguishes the novel; what makes it so remarkable is that it can be read as Stoker's own veiled psychobiography and as an allegory of late Victorian sexual repression.

That Stoker thoroughly researched *Dracula* and based much of it on travelogues and actual places is well established. Every Stoker scholar refers to his use of Emily de Laszkowska Gerard's *The Land Beyond the Forest* (1888), which was his major source of Transylvanian vampire lore. Stoker spent years visiting the British Museum Library to consult survey maps; he was particularly taken by the historical Vlad Dracula, who eventually replaced his earlier generic "Count Wampyr" as the model for the vampire. Biographers note that his mother told him many horror stories, including the true account of the Irish cholera epidemic of 1832 which, combined with his knowledge of the Russian ship *Dmitry* going aground (something he learned in the seaside resort town of Whitby in 1890) formed the basis for the vampire pestilence that Dracula brings aboard the *Demeter*.

Various writers have also pointed out the influence of Shakespeare on *Dracula*, particularly *Hamlet*, which might have been the source of the name Van Helsing (from the Danish "Helsingor," which in *Hamlet* is Elsinore Castle). This influence probably came via Stoker's work as theater manager and personal assistant to Sir Henry Irving, the charismatic actor with whom Stoker was wildly infatuated. Some have even speculated that Stoker's relationship to Irving was like Renfield's bondage to Dracula and that Irving was the model upon whom the character Dracula was based. There are volumes of biographical and historical scholarship regarding Stoker and *Dracula* that dwell on every aspect of the work. But though the textual analyses of the novel are by now comprehensive, what remains missing is a clear picture of Stoker's life that would illuminate the psychology behind *Dracula*. Most attempts to analyze Stoker remain speculative because so little is actually known about his life. He remained an effective shadow himself.

Varney the Vampire goes for the jugular in this early illustration.

What we do have is an enormously rich expression of what was germinating in Stoker's mind for nearly a decade. And from the underlying structure of *Dracula*, we can discover many of the workings of Stoker's conscious and unconscious psychology. We can begin with the implicit indications of autobiography that he encoded into the characters by examining the physiognomy of their names.

First, there is the most obvious: Abraham Van Helsing, who bears the long form of Stoker's own first name. Abraham was also the name of Stoker's father, so Van Helsing becomes a paternal figure as well (something the plot of the novel bears out). Van Helsing's last name can be read as "of Light, Sing," or "Sing of Light." The word "sing" has various connotations all regarding expression whereas "Hel" is a double-edged reference to both light (Hel as in "Hellenic") and flames (Hel as in "Hell"). Van Helsing's role in *Dracula* is that of a paternal crusader against the evil of vampirism. He is a force of "light" (scientific knowledge) pitted against the Satanic "darkness" of Dracula, which we associate with Hell. He personally oversees three rather gruesome executions of vampires, which involve staking, decapitation, and burning.

Mina Harker describes Van Helsing as "strongly built, with his shoulders set back over a broad, deep chest ... the head is noble, well-sized, broad, and large behind the ears. The forehead is broad and fine ... sloping back above two bumps or ridges wide apart; such a forehead that the reddish hair cannot possible tumble over it...." This is actually a description of Bram Stoker himself. Stoker, in an adoring fan letter to Walt Whitman (inspired by Whitman's ability to express his homosexuality), described himself in remarkably similar terms: "I am ugly but strong and determined and have a large bump over my eyebrows. I have a heavy jaw and a big mouth and thick lips—sensitive nostrils—a snubnose and straight hair."

If Van Helsing is the source and expression of knowledge and wisdom about vampires, then Jonathan Harker is the primary listener. A "Harker" is one who listens or one who "hearkens," which means to find out through inquiry. "Hark" is also a call to hunting dogs to bring them back when they have lost the scent; it can also be a whisper or a private communication (i.e., a confession). At first, the meaning of the name "Jonathan" seems to point at a biblical connection, but what I found in hours of squinting through my *Oxford English Dictionary* was rather revealing, and it confirmed my hunch that Dracula's cast was designed by Stoker to dramatize aspects of his own psychology. A "Jonathan" turns out to be mid-1800s slang for a device used to light a pipe, i.e., to "stoke" the flame of a pipe, making Jonathan literally a "stoker."

Now we turn to the author's name, "Stoker," which seems adequately obvious, and find another surprise that explains Stoker's fascination with the historical figure of Dracula. Vlad Dracula, as we all know by now through pop-culture osmosis, was the vicious, sadistic, and murderous 15th-century ruler of Transylvania known also as Vlad "Tepes," meaning Vlad the "Impaler."

"Stoker" refers to a man who tends a furnace, but the word "stoke" has a range of meanings: it is cognate with "stock," referring to a place of origin; it is a stick (sometimes used in measurement); it means to stab or to thrust with a weapon. If we combine these meanings, we see that a "stoke" is also readable as a "stake," which is what Vlad used to impale his victims. (Dracula the vampire must also remain in proximity to his "stock" by carrying with him 50 crates of dirt from his place of origin.)

What I've shown is that Stoker, Van Helsing, Harker, and Dracula are integrally related because they are all figuratively and literally stokers. In the *OED*, the word "sing" also occurs between "sin" and "singe," providing a nice poetic irony to Van Helsing's name, since he is, when it comes down to it, arguably more perverse than Dracula—in fighting the monster his zeal gives us a disturbing glimpse of his own monstrous nature.

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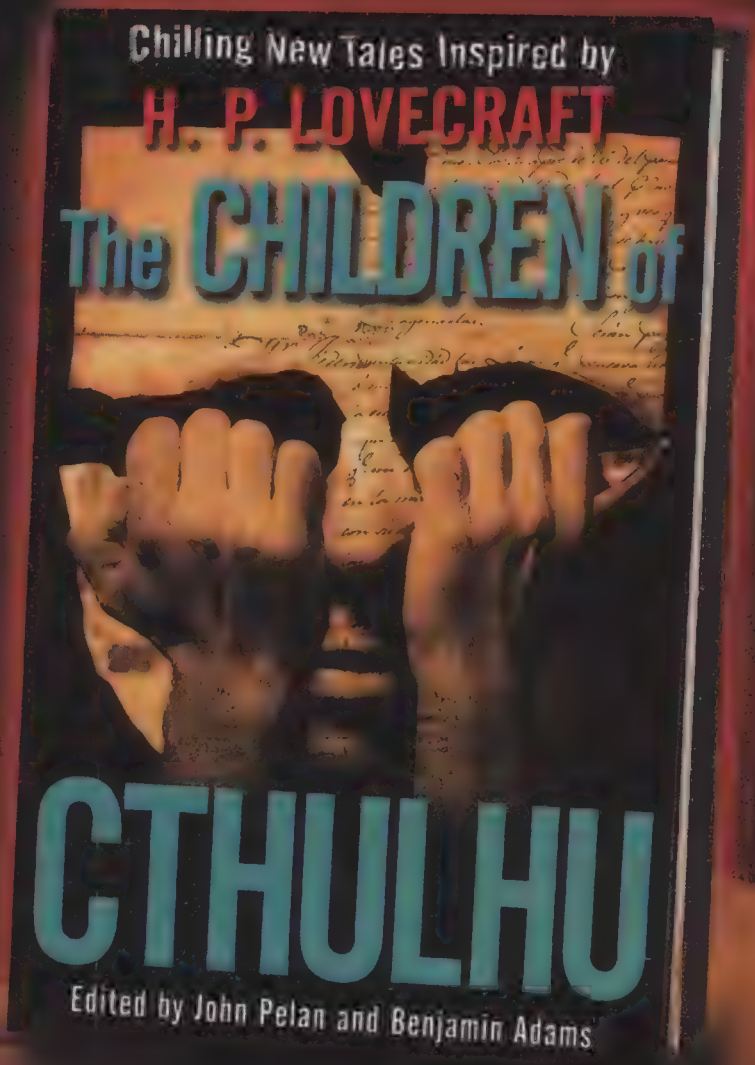

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Anne Rice's vampire Lestat was portrayed by Tom Cruise in Interview with the Vampire, *which was the first of the Vampire Chronicles to be made into a film.*

Some have suggested that Van Helsing is based on the great folklorist and Sanskrit scholar, Max Müller, who was a contemporary of Stoker's. My reading shows that rather than basing the character on Müller, Stoker incorporated Müller's "Solar Theory," a theory that, by tracing words back to their oldest meanings, attempted to prove that all folk tales and myths were ultimately about the rising and setting of the sun, i.e., allegories about the conflict between light and darkness. For *Dracula*, that seems true on many levels, the most profound being the conflict of light and dark in Stoker's own psyche, perhaps sublimated in his mind but dramatized for the reader through the relationship of the various "Stokers" in *Dracula*.

Müller's theory clearly influenced Stoker's naming of other characters: Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray (who becomes Mina Harker). Lucy is the woman who becomes a vampire and is finally staked by her own fiancé under Van Helsing's guidance. Her name is constructed from "luce," meaning "light," and Westenra, which can be read as a scrambled "Ra in West," meaning the setting sun. ("Lucy" can also be read as short for "Lucifer," which is both "bringer of light"—Venus, the morning star—and Satan. The most mundane reading of "Westenra" is as a reference to her "West End" qualities, i.e., her spoiled wealth.) She is the simultaneously sexualized and demonized woman who is destroyed through what Leonard Wolf characterizes, quite convincingly, as a figurative gang rape.

Mina's name, on the other hand, resonates with "mine" (or a hollow shaft), "mind" (as in "mind my words," making her a "harker"), and "minnie" (short for "mother"); it also may refer to "minar" as in the root for "minaret," a reference to a tower from which a muezzin looks to the East (as opposed to Lucy's West). The root meaning of "minar" is "fire," which connects Mina to "Stoker." Her maiden name, "Murray," also contains the sun reference, "ray," to read as "demure, red light." But a "muray" is a fortification or a wall; "mure" is also to wall in or block up, and "murrain" means a pestilence or dead flesh. "Murrey" refers to a purple-red or blood color. In the course of the novel, Mina becomes only partially vampirized though she shares Dracula's blood; she is "walled in" by Van Helsing's use of the host and she remains "mure" or tenderhearted and demure, not becoming voraciously sexualized like the unfortunate Lucy (though she does become menacing or "minacous" at times). She only just survives Dracula because of the devotion of her men.

Most of the significant names in *Dracula* are equally charged with symbolic meaning, suggesting that Stoker did not design them by accident. His physiognomy of naming reveals some conscious understanding of his own sexual ambivalence, his attempt to come to grips with his intense homoeroticism, and his repressed misogyny. In the end it is a vividly dramatized psychobiographical confession, full of intense and authentic contradictions. It even contains a jibe against Henry Irving, which previous critics have not noticed: If Stoker is linked to Dracula, then Irving is linked to his servant, Renfield. The root of "Renfield" is "ren" or "rend," suggesting a tearing apart; this parallels him to an inversion of "Irving": rearranging the first three leters of the name gives us "riving," which means to split things apart. Stoker may have been projecting his repressed resentment for being Irving's personal assistant.

Like Polidori, Stoker did not live to enjoy the success of his work. He died nearly penniless in 1912 of tertiary syphillis. If Polidori's death resonates with vampires and suicide, then Stoker's resonates with his own allegorical depiction of vampirism as a venereal disease.

Continued on page 84

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By Gahan Wilson

Ash-Tree Press gathers up gems of terror and macabre fantasy.

Once before I devoted my little section in *Realms of Fantasy* entirely to books brought out by that marvelous institution known as the Ash-Tree Press and in it went on at great length about the consistently high quality of their list, how well their books were produced, and the astounding ability of the publishers, Christopher and Barbara Roden, and their horde of obsessed editor minions to locate and gather up gems of the fantastic and then generously lavish them upon us.

I may or may not have been silly enough to have wondered whether they would be able to maintain this awesomely high level of quality, but if I did I needn't have done so, for they have managed to do it without any sign of winding themselves. Now, in the spirit of a consistently top athlete who suddenly decides to decorate his career with some world-record-shattering performance, they have actually topped themselves by bringing together an anthology that will henceforth be a proud Mount Everest in the the collection of anyone who seriously loves macabre fantasy: ***A Pleasing Terror, The Complete Supernatural Writings*** by M.R. James (Christopher Roden and Barbara Roden, general eds.; Ash-Tree Press, Ashcroft, British Columbia (ashtree@ ashtree.bc.ca), hardcover; 657 pp.; $75.00.)

Eric Shanower created over a hundred black and white illustrations for The Rundlestone of Oz, *as well as this wonderful jacket art.*

It has only one flaw: the subtitle, *The Complete Supernatural Works*, is incorrect in that it very seriously understates the intricate and gorgeous richness of the volume's contents.

It is most certainly true that *A Pleasing Terror* does indeed contain the complete supernatural writings of M.R. James, which is to say it has some of the best spooky and horrific fantasy ever put on paper packed between its covers, but it has more than that, much, much more. It is as if, in the dark

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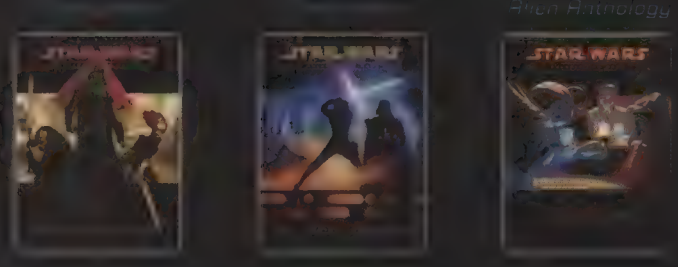

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recesses of some magical library, one had come across a whole, shadowy alcove whose tall shelves were packed with Jamesian gems ranging from his heretofore almost impossible to find to the most delightfully obscure nit picking marginalia.

If by some awful misfortune you have never heard of Montague Rhodes James before, let me have the honor and the privilege to inform you that he was (and very much is, since his original four books of sublimely spooky short stories have never once been out of print since they were first assembled into the *Collected Ghost Stories* way back when in 1931) the author of some of the best truly creepy tales of ghosts, revenants, and other monstrous manifestations ever nightmared up.

I'm careful to throw in the additional terms since James's truly amazing imagination produced such a wide and rich variety of supernatural intruders that ghost stories are only a subsection—although a sizable one—of his art. He also raised demons, introduced us to singularly evil magicians complete with their evil familiars and loathsome curses, necromanced poisonous cadavers from their tombs, and created a whole legion of completely original horrors that have played no small part in inspiring his cleverer readers to pick up their pens and wander in dark gardens of the imagination heretofore untraversed.

Also, very importantly, he demonstrated conclusively how important and effective it was to make these menaces (and they are all menaces—James would have nothing to do with with supernatural wusses!) real. Taking his lead from the Irish master of the supernatural, J. Sheridan LeFanu, and expanding upon it with genius and borrowings from his personal phobias (you will learn many revealing things about those phobias from widely varied material in *A Pleasing Terror,* by the by), he presents the reader with spooks that are repulsively and intimately physical so that when the reader touches them, or is groped by them, he or she will actually wince away from their astounding nastiness.

James was also a master of the convincing environment, being well aware that the more convincing the haunted house, the more convincing the haunt. He is always careful to give the reader a clear feeling for the landscape before pointing out the odd figure lurking behind its trees, and he made marvelous use of his career as a scholar and a highly respected antiquary. He wrote about what he knew, as they say in the how-to books.

The unnerving shadowy spaces and decidedly creepy furniture of his fictitious old cathedrals are convincing because he was an expert in and a lover of real old cathedrals and the reader is almost able to smell and touch the made-up moldering manuscripts which his often fatally snoopy characters come across because he was a bona fide, highly respected expert on unearthing and translating such things in his day-to-day life.

All of this and ever so much more is explored in *A Pleasing Terror* from a multitude of perspectives.

First, and obviously most importantly, we have the writings of James himself, which include all the well-known stories; others you've very likely never seen; his charming children's book, *The Five Jars*; a small anthology of letters including a clump of them written to a child who had forever endeared herself to James by bullying him into taking her to see Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show when it successfully stormed London; a wonderful gathering up of articles written by him which concern the art of scary writing; fascinating story fragments; 12 ghost stories translated from the Medieval Latin and, so help me God, a spoof of *Doctor Faustus!*

Anybody in their right mind ought to be happy to settle for that but, no, the Rodens have seen to it that the book includes a truly dazzling batch of essays on James and his his works from the very cream of those obsessed with him (bless their hearts!). The book starts with a preface by the publishers, an introduction by Steve Duffy, and a memoir by James's friend, S.G. Lubbock and it ends with a superb batch of essays by Rosemary Pardoe and Jane Nicholls (fascinating stuff on dear old Count Magnus's Black Pilgrimage therein!) ; a swell article by Samuel D. Russell from a long-ago fan magazine devoted to H.P. Lovecraft (who was himself a fan of James) going deeply into the important connection between horror and humor (which, as a macabre cartoonist, I have always found profoundly interesting); a lovely essay by Jacqueline Simpson on the profound influence James's scholarly career had on his career as a writer of ominous literature; and it ends with one of James's letters carefully and lovingly annotated and mulled over by Jack Adrian.

Then, at the very end, there is an excellent bibliography and a listing of his works adapted to film, radio, and TV. (Trivia question: How many of James stories were made into movies? trivia answer: One. It was "Casting the Runes" and it was called *Curse of the Demon.* And it wasn't at all bad except that they should have left out or better built the demon proper.) Then, just to make sure you are having a really good time, the stories are all illustrated (including a superb dust jacket) by Paul Lowe. All of them are excellent both in execution and choice of scene to be depicted. For example, in "Casting the Runes" he selects the slide in Karswell's evil entertainment for the children which shows the increasingly alarmed little boy walking through the woods being followed by a horrible hopping creature. It is hopping perfectly.

I don't have a star system but if I did *A Pleasing Terror* would get the lot.

I see I've allowed myself to rattle on about the James book at great length and since I've got a quantity of books to include in this Ash-Tree special I imagine it would be a good idea to do so in a sprightly manner and with a modicum of chatter.

The first of these is ***Mrs. Amworth,*** by E.F. Benson, (Ash-Tree Press; hardcover; 198 pp.; $21.00). It is the third of a wonderful series, all edited and introduced by Jack Adrian, which, when the fifth volume of the set is completed, will end by making available to the contemporary public all of the horror stories of another of one of the best writers who worked in that area, namely E.F. Benson.

Benson's tales, sometimes somewhat brutally, grab the classic supernatural genre by the neck, haul it out of the much more genteel climes favored by James and his ilk, and throw it sprawling onto the gritty sidewalks of day-to-day life. Even when he does wander off to, say, historic Cornwall and its legends, as he does in the marvelous story "Negotium Perambulans" included in this collection, the result is a very modern sort of hard-edged shock; its attitudes are very much today's.

The books are set up so that we work our way chronologically through Benson's career and this one is gathered from the early 1920s which was a time when Benson was in fine form and turning out some of his very best work, so a good number of the tales included are among his most famous, such as the eponymus (I do love that word!) "Mrs. Amworth" which is, simply, one of the best vampire stories ever; "The Horror-Horn," whose evocation of what may have survived long aeons in the Alpine heights will, I guar-

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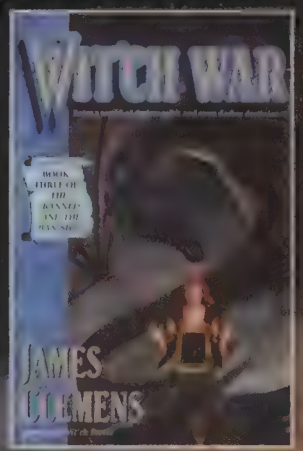

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antee it, stay with you long after you've read it; and "Number 12," a beautifully nasty little urban gem that whacks you with a sneak punch that is very much up to date.

There are also, thanks to Adrian's tireless sleuthing, a goodly quantity of really fine stories that one way or another got unfairly buried and will be unknown to you even if you style yourself as something of a completist collector of E.F. Benson.

And that's certainly very, very, good news for completist collectors of E.F. Benson!

Shadows and Silence (Barbara Roden and Christopher Roden, eds.; Ash-Tree Press; hardcover; 342 pp.; $40.00), the second collection from Ash-Tree Press, is dedicated to proving that ghost story writer H.R. Wakefield's unhappy pronouncement back at the start of the sixties—"I believe ghost story writing to be a dying art"—was one of his very few mistakes and I think that the contents of the book fully and completely vindicate their thesis.

As a sort of side demonstration, the stories go far to show something of the enormous variety of themes and moods and fundamental attitudes that are presently being explored within the restrictions of the genre. It is really quite remarkable how bottomless—and topless and sideless—the form is.

In the interest of avoiding the ridiculous practice of setting up a 10-best stories list sort of thing, I've just now opened the book at random—more or less the way you cut a

pack of Tarot cards—and find I actually did hit on one that is a special favorite of mine. Its a very lovely kind of evocation by John Whitbourn called "Excuse Me..." which is about a security officer in the sleek hugeness of the Heathrow Airport Terminal that asks some marvelously apt questions about what sort of society we've built and where it appears to be going and how do we, as human beings who have survived or been descended from a previous society—which is really quite amazingly different from this one—fit in? There is most decidedly a ghost, and a very touching one she is, but the scariest thing about her is the way she makes you wonder if you're another sort of ghost, even though you be most assuredly alive. Its a tender story all about love in spite of loneliness and hope in the midst of despair and I liked it a lot.

Before "Excuse Me..." comes a very scary story by Cooper Rener called "Which, Being Translated, Means" concerning an increasingly worried young man and his mother, both of whom seem to be very ordinary and living in a very ordinary way. It takes place quietly and ordinarily as could possibly be but it's a truly appalling monster story with a maliciously sardonic twist in it which I think is truly worthy of Ambrose Bierce himself (for Gods sake don't tell me you've never heard of Ambrose Bierce!) and it leaves you all alone with a one foot up in the air ending that is profoundly chilling.

After "Excuse Me..." comes a lusty, riproaring Grand Guignol of a tale where we follow a priest only just graduating from a singularly sinister college where the students never once look at their teachers but expect to be contacted by them once again at the end of their earthly careers.

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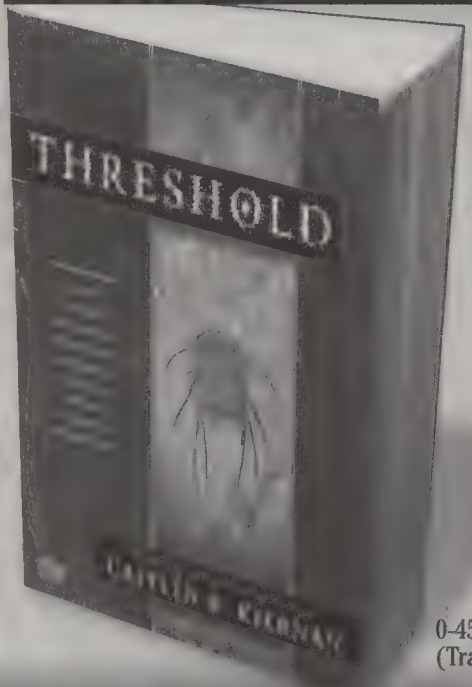

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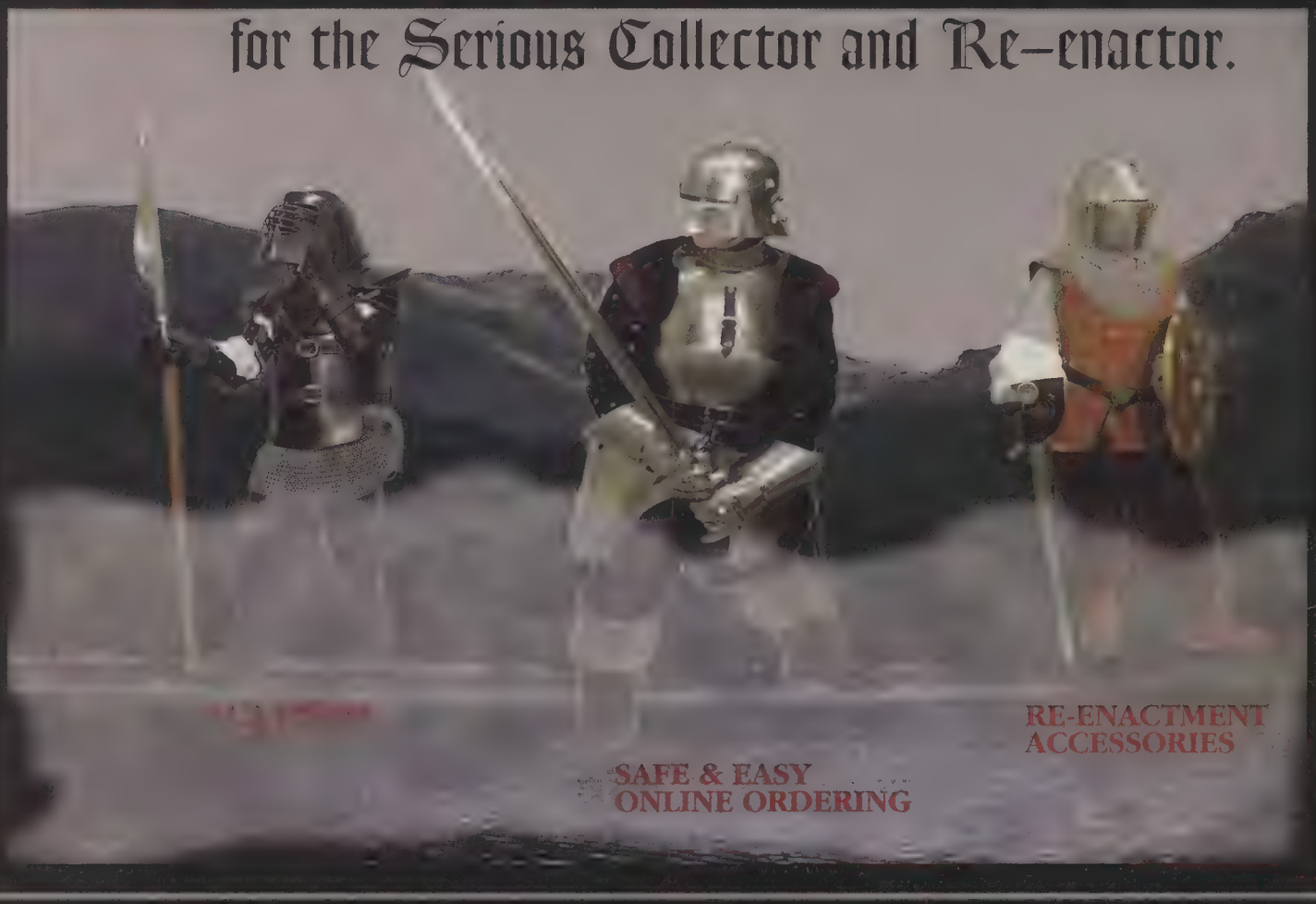

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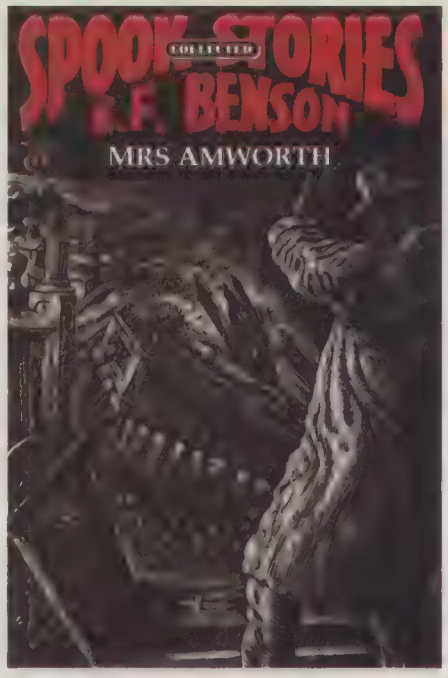
tion full of ominous overtones. The priest leaves the wretched being as quickly as he can but then is unwise enough to linger at a crossroads gibbet and gape at its grisly corpse long enough to allow the hangman to rumble up behind him in his cart and he soon finds himself entangled with the creature's vile doings.

The story is unabashedly operatic and highly visual, full of smoky bright highlights and pitch-dark shadows. Everybody's dressed in medieval gear and it's the darkest of Dark Ages. Great sins have been committed and are openly discussed. Merciless revenge is taken and our priest only wishes it could last forever. There is nothing that is not dark nor doomish. I loved it.

I'm very happy to be able to tell you that this peek is typical and that it goes on like that throughout the whole entire length of this marvelously entertaining book!

I remember when there used to be lots of huge old book shops in Manhattan; a lot of them on Fourth Avenue down around the Bowery. Some of them had a large number of floors made up of one vast room each and all of them had cavernous basements and every one of these immense chambers was lined with bookshelves and packed with tables bearing yet more books, and often as not there were still more books stacked in corners and on the sides of stairways.

Among these books one commonly came

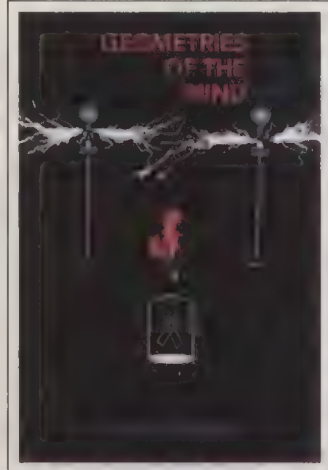


across the books of Thomas Burke. They were smallish, and if they still had their covers they generally showed sinister or at least mysterious Orientals behaving furtively.

I remember I liked those covers well enough that they would now and then inspire me to pick up one of Burke's books and browse through a story or two—it was easy enough since they were usually very short—but then my interest would tend to fade because what I was hoping for was something along more sensational lines, the kind of Orientalia that Sax Rohmer dished out, and so I would put the book back onto its shelf or on its tabletop or in its corner and go on my way.

Now Jessica Amanda Salmonson, she who edited the absolutely superb *Twilight and Other Supernatural Romances* by Marjorie Bowen for Ash-Tree Press, has lovingly put together a collection of Burke's darker stories called ***The Golden Gong and Other Night-Pieces*** (Ash-Tree Press; hardcover; $41.50), and she has been clever enough to pepper her marvelous Foreword to it with no less than seven full-page reproductions of the aforementioned covers so that I found myself once again intrigued with them and this time it led to my reading Ms. Salmonson's Foreword which is really as good a job as can be done with this sort of thing. Mixing nostalgia with affection, stirring in the touching and intriguing details of Burke's rather odd, rather sad life, and working in various other magics until she'd completely won me over, put Sax Rohmer right out of my head, and got me to reading the stories starting with "The Golden Gong," which, as she avers, is probably the best of them all, though I found as I read through the book, that it has several close contenders.

I can't resist ending without at least giving



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a mention of a most interesting artifact, the first publication of the first ghost story ever written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: ***The Haunted Grange of Goresthorpe*** (with an Introduction by Owen Dudley Edwards and an Afterword by Christopher Roden; produced by Calabash Press for the Arthur Conan Doyle Society (can be contacted at the Ash-Tree Press; hardcover; 65 pp.; $35.00). Also I would hate to have someone out there who might be extremely interested in getting hold of such a thing not even to know that it existed.

It was never sold and, frankly, one can see why it could not quite make the hurdle, but in the light of what happened then—not just Sherlock Holmes but Doyle's very good ghost stories such as "The Captain of the Pole Star"—it makes for fascinating reading. You can discern the first gropings of one of the best short story craftsmen ever born, and though he doesn't manage to reach the goal in "Goresthorpe" one can see in retrospect that he was even then heading in the right direction.

The Introduction by Owen Dudley Edwards is full of insights and packed with interesting information. Among other things it contains many depressing quotes from letters poor Doyle wrote in this doomed attempt to storm the bastions of *Blackwoods Magazine*, a publication the young and aspiring author ardently desired to be a part of. Anyone who has made any serious moves to carry out suchlike campaigns will wince and writhe in compassionate recognition at the alternating rising and sinking of hopes, the hideous dark suspicions, the total confusions. And encouraged that he stayed with it and won!

Gahan Wilson

The Beasts of Barakhai, Mickey Zucker Reichert; DAW Books, NY; hardcover; 327 pp.; $23.95.

Although Mickey Zucker Reichert boasts over a dozen books to her credit, I had no idea what to expect when approaching her latest, having never delved into her novels before. But that's merely Standard Operating Procedure for a reviewer, and I plunged ahead resolutely, with a mix of trepidation and anticipation. To my pleasure, I discovered an amiable adventure in an alternate world, reminding me in its own fashion of such classics as the de Camp/Pratt collaborations, the sidewise excursions of Keith Laumer, and even, just faintly, C.S. Lewis's Narnia books.

Benton Collins is a rather nerdish graduate student, first encountered by the reader as he works late at night taking care of some experimental animals. (Benton's not too egregious a dork, for he's got a girlfriend, albeit a domineering one, and a social life.) Spotting one of his charges, a rat, escaping across the lab, Collins follows it into a dark storage closet. On hands and knees he pursues the animal—

Continued on page 82

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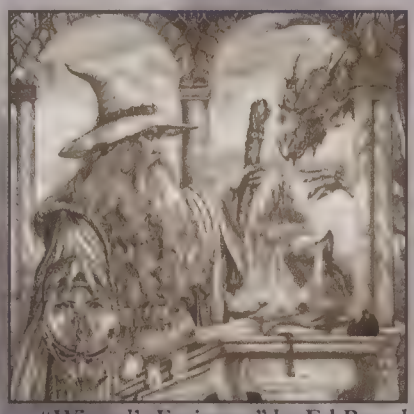

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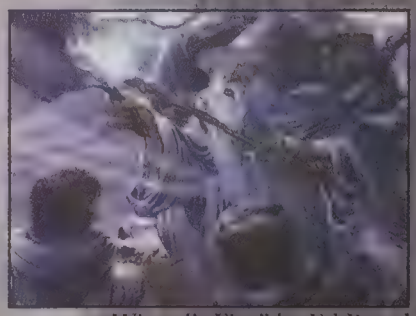

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A miracle can be a small, unobtrusive thing—
like a tortoise, or a man who loves God and his people.

Savior and Reptile

BY STEVEN POPKES
ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GIBBS

It was just past dawn and I was sunning myself by the side of the road when I felt the vibrations in the earth. I pulled back into the shade of a rock and watched. Three men on horses, colorfully dressed, came to the edge of the road and milled together. Two of them shouted at the third in a language I did not know—not that this was in itself unusual. There are many languages of men I don't know. Once, they threw Hebrew words at one another that were so bastardized and mispronounced I could only recognize the sound of the language but not the substance.

Finally, they came to some kind of agreement, came together, and rode off toward the East. I looked after them. For some time, I pondered: colorful garb that was out of place in this area; horses of a size I had never seen; these three excited by something in the East. I resolved to find out about it and began walking East myself.

Still, patience more than rapidity is a virtue for a tortoise. Jesus was nearly six when I found him.

From the shadows under the grapes, I watched and listened to them for several days. Humans rarely look below their knees and so I considered myself safe.

Jesus sat in the vegetables looking underneath their leaves for pests.

"Since you're just sitting there," I said in passable Hebrew, "pull off a leaf for me."

He turned and looked at me, sat back cross-legged and stared. "Did you speak?"

"Of course."

"Turtles don't speak," he said with finality.

"If God can talk through a burning bush, why can't a tortoise speak?"

"You're not God."

"It's a lesser miracle, but the principle's the same." I reached up for a leaf on my own.

He frowned. "My mother won't like you eating the vegetables."

"Then, get me something different."

The little devil did more than that. He built a cage for me quick as winking and put me in it. Not a terribly sophisticated affair, but he'd inherited a skill with wood from his father. I paced the borders of the cage back and forth and looked closely at the walls. Once around the cage a few times, I turned and started back the way I'd come, to see if I'd missed anything. Then, I repeated it to make sure.

Jesus watched me struggle to escape the enclosure. It seemed to hurt his feelings and he looked as if he wanted to cry. "Why are you doing this? Didn't I make a nice place for you? Isn't it better than the desert?"

I stopped for a moment, looked at the boy for several minutes. "It is in my nature."

Jesus sat down next to the fence. "If I let you out will you stay with me?"

I didn't reply for some minutes, thinking it through. "Ah. You wish to *bargain*." I considered further. "I came here on my own. Apparently, it is my nature to come to you. Certainly it is in my nature to associate with human beings. I've been doing that for many years. I will promise this, then. If you will release me, I will be true to my nature."

He nodded solemnly and brought me out of the cage and placed me on the ground. "I'll call you Ezen, 'cause you look like a rock."

Once I had been called a second cousin to a rock; it had not been a compliment. I nodded. "As you wish."

Jesus' birth was not sufficiently long after their marriage to be completely free of scandal. "Every baby takes nine months but the first one," as the saying goes. Even so, they seemed to be a devoted couple, both to each other and to the boy, in their rough, mammalian way. There was never any doubt as to the boy's parentage: He smelled of Joseph through and through.

Still, times were not easy for them. I had learned a great deal searching for Jesus. Sitting beneath the bushes and listening, I heard rumors of riot and vicious retaliation as Herod aged. There was constant intrigue between the priests, Herod's government, and Rome. Every few months came a proclamation in the streets for another new Messiah. Some weeks after that another man hung from a tree. This had been going on before Jesus had been born and would, no doubt, continue after his death.

Jesus and I talked often over the years. He kept these conversations secret and for my own part I preferred it so. Few are the bonds made between mammal and reptile and I had no interest in forging another. I did notice he never asked me anything about where I had been before and what I was doing with him. I did not know why. Perhaps it was because he was a child with a child's acceptance of things.

I had little contact—other than observation—with young Jesus' friends save one, his cousin John. John was several years older than Jesus and the younger boy followed after him every chance he got. Jesus would have been happier, I think, had he not been the eldest boy with all of Joseph's expectations brought to bear on him. Around John, Jesus played the role of delighted and fawning puppy. For his own part, John was a shrewd, cruel adolescent: a typical budding human male.

Jesus and I were talking when John came up behind him. I had smelled him and fallen silent but Jesus had not noticed.

"Who are you talking to?" demanded John.

"My turtle, Ezen." Jesus reached down and picked me up and showed me to him, something I absolutely and truly detested. I mean, the boy was warm and smelled as attractive as can any mammal, but being waved about like a flag was extremely unpleasant.

"He squirms, doesn't he?" said John, watching me.

"He doesn't like to be held," said Jesus and sat me down again. Immediately, I started for cover.

"Let's get some lamp oil and set fire to him," suggested John, smiling.

I redoubled my efforts to reach the brush.

"You're not going to set fire to my turtle!" cried Jesus.

"We could play catch with him."

"No!"

I had just reached the cover of the bushes when Jesus picked me up again and pressed me to his chest. This was his idea of safety.

John did not press the matter and left soon after. I did not forget it, however, and hid whenever I heard or smelled John in the vicinity.

Things did not go well for the family in the next few years. Jesus grew like a weed, but political intrigue grew faster. Most of the commissions in carpentry had to do with the priests and Joseph was not well connected. His business suffered. Jesus had inherited Joseph's confidence with wood and helped out where he could, but Mary had ambitions for her son and sent him to the temple. This caused a little friction in the family, since they could ill afford to pay any priest to teach Jesus.

Jesus often spoke with me about the priests and occasionally asked questions. I answered if I knew anything. It was stupid of me, I know. Trouble was bound to follow.

Jesus found me sunning myself at the edge of the garden.

"You'd better hide out," he said sitting down. "Mama's upset the greens got eaten. Did you have to eat them all the way into the ground? There's nothing left but stubs."

"That's the best part of the stalk."

"Better watch out, anyway."

I looked up at him. He smelled afraid. "What happened?"

He rubbed his face. "I'm not sure. Timerphon kept me in the temple this afternoon. He and a couple of other priests asked me a lot of strange questions." He shivered. "I heard they took a whole family out and stoned them a few weeks ago."

"What kind of questions?"

"Weird things. Like, the role of Rome in the temple. And did my parents feel that the temple should be giving money to the legions of Rome. Then, they asked me some really complicated questions about the dietary and marriage laws." He thought for a minute. "One had to do with if a woman were married a lot of times, and each husband died, which one would she be married to in heaven."

"What did you answer?"

"I said I didn't know." He shrugged. "I said I didn't know anything *about* heaven. Then I tried to figure out what they were asking for. Like a test? So I said, well, one thing's for sure, if heaven was being with God, then it couldn't be much like here—this being pretty far from the heart of God, or so I've always heard. So maybe things would be different."

"What did they say?"

Jesus looked down. "They didn't like that answer. Then, they asked me if people should give money to God or to Rome. Heck, I said, God shouldn't need money. I mean, He ought to have everything He needs. Besides, the Romans mint the money; it's Rome's money, everybody says so. So, I said give them what's theirs and give God what's his." He fell silent, then burst out. "I mean, how was I to know they were talking about *taxes*! And then, they started asking me about my cousin John."

"What about John?"

Jesus gestured broadly. "Who does he talk to? Where does he go? Where does he spend his time? What does he drink? Who's his woman? As if John had only one." He shook his head bitterly and I couldn't tell if it was because of the questions or John's ways with the local women. "What color is his robe? Does he wear anything underneath?"

"What did you answer?"

"I did what he'd do for me: I said I didn't know. I'm scared, Ezen."

I thought for a long time. It grew dark. Jesus shivered but he stayed there with me. I thought until I felt myself getting sluggish as the temperature dropped.

"Listen, Jesus," I said finally. "Go inside and tell your father every word you've said to me. Leave nothing out."

"I can't do that," Jesus cried. "He'll crucify me."

"No, he won't. You've done nothing. But I suspect you will be on your way to Egypt before daybreak."

"I'm a reptile, second cousin to a snake. We have almost nothing in common. We have a bond but it's unlikely to be friendship."

"What do you mean, we'll be going to Egypt?"

"You're not the first person to be questioned about politics. Heresy is where you find it here in Israel. You'll be safe in Egypt. You'll be able to learn things—"

"I don't want to go. Besides, you're a turtle. How would you know we're going to Egypt?"

I looked at him in distaste. "You're 11 years old. I've lived better than 50 times that. How do you think?"

I could see him laboriously working that out. "Have you ever been to Egypt?"

"Of course."

"Will you show me things?"

Boylike, he'd changed from fear to excitement. "I could," I said, starting to squirm to be let down. "But I'm not going with you."

"You've *got* to!"

"I do not. Now, put me back under the bush so I can get some sleep."

He sat next to me as I began to cool down. "Will I ever see you again?"

"It's entirely possible," I said as I began to nod off. "One of us should be able to find the other."

Near dawn, I awoke. As I was warming, armed men came and searched the house. They found nothing. Joseph and his family had gone. When the sun was higher, I left also.

"Yeah," he said as he peeled another orange. "Papa died about two years ago."

I bit into the orange he'd given me, felt the sweet juice wash my throat.

He looked at me with a smile. "I'm not boring you, am I?"

"Not as long as you keep plying me with oranges."

He snickered.

It had been six years and he'd grown some in height, but more in breadth and muscle. His beard was still wispy though his shoulders were broad and promised that in some years he would be formidably stocky.

"Mama insisted I stay with Ramo." He sucked the orange noisily.

"Who's Ramo?"

"He's a physician. Papa got him to take me on as an apprentice." He threw away the peel. "I was too good to go into carpentry," he said airly.

"So, why are you here?" I moved out of the shade to get warm. He'd found me in a small crack in the earth in Galilee. Outside, the wind was strong and cool in spite of the sun. Here in this improbable grotto, it was warm and there was a plentiful supply of greens. I'd been here two years.

"I came to say hello," he said and shrugged. "Besides, you could use the company."

"You've done that. Thanks for the oranges." I'd lost patience with the arrogant adolescent Jesus had become. I started to move back toward the spring. There was a short cave there and I could take a nap.

"Wait a minute," he yelled and put a foot in front of me.

It startled me and I drew back into my shell.

"I need to talk to you," he said angrily.

I remained silent and withdrawn while he yelled at me. Pity, I thought. He had a lot of heart for a mammal.

Finally, he was reduced to kneeling in front of me and screaming at me. In a fury, he picked me up and held me as if to throw me against the rocks.

"Will you kill me now?" I asked quietly.

He stared at me, breathing hard, put me down. He leaned back against the rock.

"You were never so stubborn when I was a child," he said.

"You were never so rude."

He shrugged, stung. "John contacted me."

"Ah. That's why you're here."

"Yes. My cousin John. He went to prison for a bit. Did you know that?"

"Why?"

"For attempting to bring freedom to an oppressed Israel!"

I blinked. "I beg your pardon."

He'd stood up to say this, glanced down at me and sat down, looking embarrassed. "He joined up with the Freedom Fighters."

"Whose?"

"What do you mean, 'whose'?"

I shook my head. "Jesus, there are a hundred messiahs, heretics, and 'freedom fighters' a week in Israel. Whose crowd has he fallen in with?"

"I'm not sure." He shrugged. "He mentioned someone named Barabbas."

"Wonderful."

"Who is Barabbas?"

"Nobody important. Or effective." I stared at him for a long time. "What do you want from me?"

"Should I join him?"

"Who? Barabbas?"

"Well, join John. I guess that means join Barabbas."

"How old do you think I am?"

He grinned crookedly. "I remember when we left for Egypt—better than five hundred years, by my calculation."

"I'm probably older. But who keeps track? So, you want my advice? Why?"

"'Cause I trust you," he said defensively.

"Why?"

"You're my friend."

"Friend!" I snorted in disgust. "I'm a reptile, second cousin to a snake. Your God put enmity between you and my cousin. You're a mammal. We have almost nothing in common. We have a bond but it's unlikely to be friendship."

"You came looking for me."

"I never said that."

He didn't speak for a moment. "It's true though. Isn't it?"

It was my turn not to speak for a moment. "I don't know. I came looking for something and found you. I'll never know if it was you I was looking for."

His face looked suddenly pinched as it did when he was a child and about to cry. I could not allow him that luxury.

"You haven't answered my question," I demanded. "Why do you want *my* advice?"

"You're the only person who has nothing to lose if you tell me the truth."

"There is no truth," I said flatly. "There is only opinion."

He stared at me fiercely. "You have nothing to lose by being honest."

I stared back at him, relaxed. "True. Toss me another orange."

He did so, laughed nervously with a sound like a sob and leaned back against the warm rock.

I considered as I ate. "There's not time enough to think about this properly."

"I can wait."

I laughed shortly, myself. As if mammals knew anything about waiting. "Here is my unconsidered opinion: I don't like John. I don't trust him. I've heard nothing good about Barabbas. And no force on earth will ever force the Romans out of Israel. They'll leave in their own good time."

He leaned forward, eagerly. "When?"

"Everything moves on eventually."

He relaxed, smiled bitterly. "I don't think I can wait that long."

"I'm not surprised. Go back to Egypt. Go back to your mother. Become a physician. If you still feel you want to give your life for your country, give it as a living life: Come back and heal them. You'll do more than a thousand Johns."

Jesus bit his lip. "That's what you think?"

"From the depths of my reptilian heart."

It was nearly sunset and the desert was cooling fast. He brought me next to him under his blanket in the dark. I didn't protest; he was, after all, warm. But in the morning, while I was befuddled with the cold, he left. All that was left of him was his smell and a warm place in the sand.

"You should have a drink with me," Jesus said, holding out the wineskin in my general direction.

I stepped back. It smelled of spoiled fruit. "I'll pass, thank you."

"Suit yourself." He squirted the wine in his mouth. Some dribbled out the corners and stained his robe.

I'd stayed in Galilee but moved farther south, where the moist air and occasional rain had turned the desert green. It was here, as I recalled, that a great forest of Lebanese cedars had stood. Cut down, now, like every other tree in the region. The bushes and undergrowth made it difficult to farm and so few humans lived here. A pleasant trait that was sure to change in time.

We lay in the shade of some scrub bushes with the road in sight.

"God, life is good," he said dreamily. "Look at me. My parents take me to Egypt to escape being stoned and I come back a respected doctor. With a wife. And a son—a strong, healthy son. There'll be more: I'm a man with more than one arrow in my quiver."

"And your mother?" I asked.

Jesus frowned, then shrugged again. "Difficult, as she has always been. She and Rachel don't get along. But it's better now that there's a grandchild. You'd think sons appeared by virgin birth for all the attention they give me, sometimes." He wagged a finger at me. "Make no mistake, my friend. To women, men are only a means to create children. If they could do without us, they would." He laughed again.

A drunken Jesus laughed more than a sober one. I reflected on the difference and decided that the adult drunken form was marginally more likable than the adult sober form.

"I figured you out when I was in Egypt," he said. He rummaged in his pouch and brought out a pair of oranges and gave them to me. "You're a spirit come to counsel me—a sort of guardian angel, but in mortal form. Perhaps you were enlightened in a former life and this is your reward."

"Scant reward, this," I said between mouthfuls of orange.

"True," he said, placidly. "Or perhaps you sinned in such a manner that this is your penance."

I grunted, wiped my face.

"All right," he said and drank some more. "You tell me. What are you?"

"I'm old. That's all." I tore the second orange and bit into the sweetness inside. "There aren't very many of us left. There were never very many of us to begin with, but we just didn't age."

"Spirits?"

"Tortoises: Once a tortoise reaches a certain age not much can kill him. We don't die of old age."

> "So much sickness lies in people's lives. You have to cure the spirit. It's a bigger job than I imagined. Hatred, loathing, and rage all have their consequences in the body."

He snorted. "That's absurd. All things have a life span—insects, elephants, man."

"All things are what they are, Jesus. We are all hatched—born in your case—live if we can, die when we can't anymore." I looked at him. "The length of that time is variable."

"The reason you talk, then, is because you've just gotten old enough to learn? That seems improbable."

I returned my attention to the orange. "I have no idea how I talk. It's not a question I dwell on."

"There must be some explanation."

"There may be. I'm just incurious about it."

"Surely—"

"Jesus!" I looked at him, impatience finally getting the better of my temper. "Humans are always looking for explanations. I'm not interested in them. Is that food over there? Is there water over the hill? Where is there shade from the midday sun and a warm rock to rest on at night? These are the important questions. Humans are mammals, that is to say they are born knowing nothing and have to question their entire lives. I was born knowing who I was. Look at the snake and the lizard, working for their food, knowing what's important. Look at the flowers, never working at all, but they grow according to their nature. I know my own nature. I need not pursue it."

"What of beauty, Ezen?" Jesus asked quietly.

"What of it?"

"Look at the flowers," he said. "They are so beautiful. Surely that is also part of their nature."

"They are not beautiful for you," I said, feeling a rare tenderness toward him. "You are merely allowed to observe them in passing."

"He was another son. I know. I delivered him myself. She, of course, was already dead." Jesus contemplated the wineskin. He had been drinking steadily for some hours. His eyes were sunken and his hands thin and fragile looking. Suddenly, the tears came again. He did not sob. He just stared across the desert.

He had found me near Nazareth. I'd wandered south, smelling out some new growth. It was an orchard and along its edges a vineyard. I had been there at least a year, maybe more.

"What of your first son?" I asked.

"Dead, also." He drank from the skin. "Puncture wound from a Roman nail. It grew septic. I cut off his leg and cauterized it. It didn't help. He died delirious and raving, calling for his mother. He didn't know me at all." Jesus looked at me. "If you are a spirit, as I have often suspected, tell me now of the other side. It is now that I need to know. Comfort me."

"I don't have much comfort." I tried to think of something but nothing came. "I know no more than breath. It comes in; it goes out. When it does not return you are dead."

"How is it you die? You live so long."

I was silent so long, thinking about his question, he had to prod me with his finger.

"Come now, no shirking; speak to me truly," he said bitterly.

"There are two ways," I said slowly. "The first is what you would expect: disease, fire, falling, the hand of man or beast. The second is less precise. Sometimes, instead of having life taken away, one just loses it. It ceases to be worth the trouble."

Jesus looked interested. "Really. What happens then?"

"One stops. Stops eating. Stops moving. Stops drinking. Eventually, death ensues. I've seen it happen. When I was younger, I thought it impossible. Now, I see more clearly."

"I see." He leaned back. The desert shimmered in a heat haze. "John has written me and asked me to come join him with the Essenes. They have need of a doctor. I think I will go to them. I have need of being needed."

He rested his hand on my back, and though it was uncomfortable, I did not protest. It seemed to comfort him.

"They are a great comfort to me," Jesus said. "I feel as if I were serving God at last."

I snorted. He had brought me oranges again. "If you brought me oranges more often, God would smile upon you."

He chuckled. "It's a good thing to feed the poor in spirit, eh? The brethren seem to like me as well. They feel I have something to say to them and they to me." Jesus grinned sourly. "John wishes to take credit for any good I might do there. He said he prophesied my coming." He shrugged. "It beats drinking. I've been sober four years."

"I see."

"He takes people down to the river and washes them and calls them blessed. They leave him gifts." Jesus spit. "It is like watching someone purchasing salvation. He has also taken a mistress—though by rights, it is *she* who has taken *him*."

"Who?"

"Salome. The dancer. The Essenes couldn't take that. He left to live at court. I worry for him. I think he still communicates with Barabbas. Between that and lying between the legs of the King's whore, he could yet be killed."

I wiped my face. "That is not your problem."

"He is my cousin. I should do something."

"Do what? You have no army. You have no weapon—even Barabbas has more than you, and his motley crew has little enough. Perhaps if I were the spirit you have suggested, I could help. It'd cost you, though."

"Cost me?"

I intoned: "Spirits are like gods: They like followers. Look out there. All that can be yours."

"The desert?"

"But only if you fall down and worship me."

"Not the desert. Try Jerusalem. Or even Bethlehem."

"Sorry. Only the desert this week. Maybe next time."

We both laughed.

Jesus fell silent, rubbed his face. "Still, Ezen. I'm 30 years old. I ought to do something with my life."

"I met him at John's funeral," Jesus began as he gave me an orange. "He was not anything like I imagined."

"Who? John?" I left the orange. I hadn't the heart for it somehow.

"No. Barabbas." Jesus peeled another orange meditatively. "I've started a clinic among the poor here in Jerusalem. It's bad enough that medicine in Israel is so bad compared to Egypt—I've known that for some time. But it's contemptible that the poor should suffer so disproportionately. It's been very successful; good medicine is something of a miracle anywhere around here." He looked pensive. "And I've been giving … talks."

"Talks?"

"Yes. So much of sickness lies in people's lives, you see. Ramo taught me that. You have to cure the spirit. It's a bigger job than I imagined." He stopped. "I don't know how to say this. Hatred, loathing, and rage all have their consequences in the body. Ramo taught that the turning away from such emotions cures the body." He looked uncomfortable. "You cure a few cases of skin rot or warts and right away people are saying you're healing lepers and raising the dead. It's the condition of medicine here that's the problem, really."

"Jesus," I said, irritated. "What are you talking about?"

"Barabbas," he said. "I spoke to him at the funeral. He said that he'd heard all sorts of good things about me. How I was doing marvelous things—miraculous things—in the city. He asked me to give one of these … talks I've been giving."

"By 'talks', do you mean 'sermons'?"

"No!" he said violently. Then, more quietly. "No. They're not sermons, but Barabbas seemed to think they were. Barabbas is very popular among some people. I can see why: He's very charismatic. He can speak to you of simple things and invest them with great importance. Some say he might be the Messiah, come to free Israel."

"What do you think?"

"I don't believe in Messiahs. I'd like to see the Romans out, though."

"You're thinking about joining him?"

"I don't know," he said defensively. "I don't know what role a doctor would play in an armed camp. Patch people up just to have them go out and get gutted by a spear again? It's just that when I spoke to him, Barabbas made me feel that he really is doing something for Israel. Something important. I suppose I want to be doing something like that, too."

"Your clinic is saving lives?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he said and shrugged. Then, smiled. "We have a number of patients. I've had to recruit help—a couple of fishermen and farmers. People I can train to sew wounds and dispense herbs for simple complaints. It's belief that makes it work much of the time, though."

"I said it 20 years ago. I'll say it again." I walked over next to him and bumped his foot until he looked at me. "If you want to dedicate your life to your country, dedicate it to the living, not the dying. Stay with your clinic. Leave Barabbas alone."

I was awakened roughly by someone holding me. As I warmed, I grew aware of smells, the feeling of coarse cloth.

"Are you awake yet?" came an urgent whisper.

All I could see was shadow but I could smell Jesus. "Barely. Put me back. We can talk again in the morning."

"He's here. He came this evening. He's staying with me."

"Who?" Then, I thought. "Barabbas, of course." I shook my head and finally came awake. "Get rid of him. He's dangerous."

"I can't just put him out in the street. He'll get arrested."

"So will you if you let him stay there. Is there a reward for him?"

Jesus didn't reply for a moment. "Sort of."

"What do you mean?"

"There's this trumped-up charge of thievery against him. I think there's some kind of reward for that."

"You've both gone stupid. You have a clinic for the poor. It's in a poor neighborhood. You've recruited the poor. Now you harbor a revolutionary. Don't you think somebody's going to turn him in for the reward money?"

"Oh, God!" he cried and dropped me on the sand. I heard him running.

Aching and bruised, I dug myself slowly under a stone and waited for the light and warmth of morning.

Lying under the hedges next to the market, it wasn't hard to piece together what had happened. The soldiers had come for Barabbas and found both of them and arrested them. It was not difficult to find this out, but it had taken some days. In another day, I found out where they were being kept.

Near dawn, I roused myself and paced the length of the building where it faced the road. After checking its length a few times, I found a crack I could squeeze and burrow through. I could smell him in the dark. It was slow, cold going.

I found myself in a small, dark room with him. I could hear him breathing. I was so cold I could barely think. I found bare skin and bit, trying to wake him up. He sat up in a cursing rage and picked me up, ready to dash me against the wall, stopped.

"Ezen?" he asked of me in his hand in the dark.

I wasn't able to reply. He held me against his chest until I was warm.

"How are you?" I was finally able to speak.

"Beaten. My right arm is broken and, also, a couple of ribs, I think." He coughed and I could feel him spasm with the pain. "Are you here to help me escape?"

"There is no escape."

"Then, what are you doing here?"

"I am being here with you."

"Ah." He did not speak for a while. "I'm going to die. They're going to kill me, aren't they?"

"So I understand. It's been the talk on the street for days."

I heard him nod in the dark. "Barabbas cut himself some kind of a deal. I don't know the details. He goes free. He wasn't able to include me." He nodded again. "He said he tried. It seems I don't have the right connections. Ciaphas and his associates want to make an example of *somebody* and I'm very convenient." He cradled me against his left arm. "I'm very glad you've come. It's very frightening in here. Alone."

I didn't say anything.

After a time, he spoke up. "I keep wondering if my life was ever any good."

"Any good?"

"Yes. Barabbas spoke a great deal of working for the common good. It was quite a thing with him. I feel so odd about it: Here it is. I'm going to die in a disgusting, painful manner and I can't quite catch on to it. I just keep thinking about Rachel and my mother and my dead son and the clinic and I keep wondering if any of it was ever any good. Do you know?"

"You're asking me?"

"Yes. I think so."

"How should I know?" I said, exasperated. "I'm a reptile for God's sake."

"You've known me nearly all my life. You've never been anything but completely honest with me. Have I lived a good life? Have I made any sort of difference at all?"

"I don't know," I answered. "I'd have to think about it."

"Don't think overlong," said Jesus testily. "If you take your usual time about it I might not be around to hear the answer."

"For all I know, I'm the oldest of my kind," I said at last. "Humans have been taking our eggs, killing us for food, and moving into where we live for as long as I can remember, and that is a long time. All of the others I once knew are dead. Some were killed and eaten. Some just decided humans smelled too bad, or the water near them tasted poorly. The habits of some were too ingrained over the years to live near humans. So, when humans finally invaded their territories, they just decided it was too difficult to continue to live. The greatest talent we have is to wait, and they waited for things to change. Things didn't and they died. It was as simple as that. People have marched along these roads as long as I can remember.

"You want to know if you did any good. I tell you, I only know this: The only good you will ever know you did is what you have seen with your own eyes. Nothing lives after you. Things you have said will be twisted and changed to fit circumstances you have never foreseen and never intended, the very words you have uttered will be reinterpreted and used for reasons unconceived by you. The deeds you accomplished that you consider most important will be forgotten and your actions that you least considered or were most ashamed of will become those for which you are remembered. There is nothing special to you that did not come to a thousand others like you, and if you are remembered at all a generation after you are dead it will be because of whim, circumstance, and random chance. Therefore, it is unprofitable to consider the impact you have on the world afterward. Instead, look at what you have done and judge yourself on that."

"It is unprofitable to consider the impact you have on the world afterward. Instead, look at what you have done and judge yourself on that."

Jesus leaned back against the cell. "Slim comfort. What's a man to live for?"

"Only a man would have to ask that kind of stupid question."

Jesus laughed. "I cured a few people. I made my mother happy, for a while. I fed a turtle."

"For that last, your name is engraved in gold in the Hereafter."

He held me close and I did not protest.

They came for him that night. He buried me in the corner and left quietly with them. I struggled out and made my way back to the crack in the wall I had found. It was just after dawn when I found myself outside.

I walked from one end of the Jerusalem Road to the other, looking for him. It took time. I was resolved not to leave until I saw him.

I found him hanging from a tree, his arms nailed above his head, his legs to the trunk. Blood was dripping from his feet. He did not recognize me—could not see me at all. His pain was such that he saw and heard nothing else. All he could do was groan and mutter.

I stayed there another day and a night until he died, though he never became clear enough to know me. There was no one else there to be with him.

His mother claimed the body and took it away. I watched her go. Then, I began the long walk out of Jerusalem.

After that, I came here. To the edge of the desert. I found a stream and drank. I found some palm fruit and ate. The water did not refresh me and the fruit did not sit well in my stomach. The sky feels darker to me and the sun does not warm me as it once did. The taste has gone out of things and all I can smell is man.

I sit here and wait for things to change. ❧

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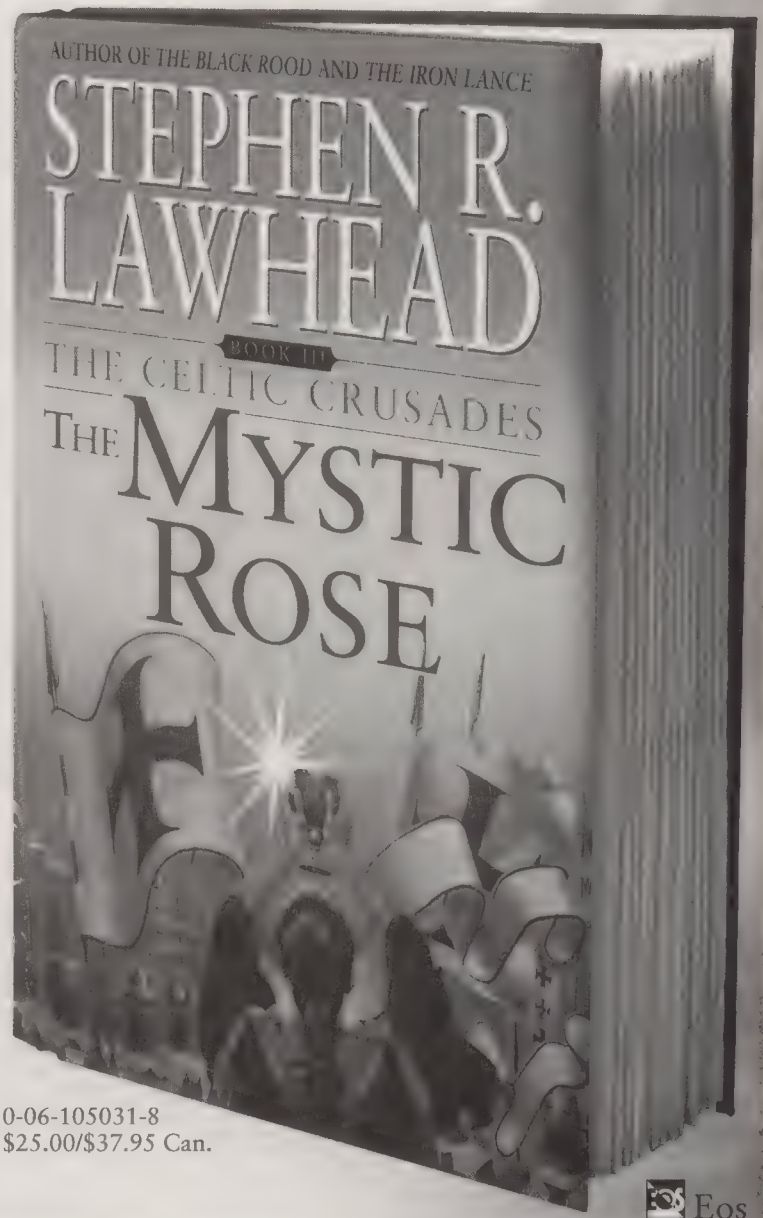

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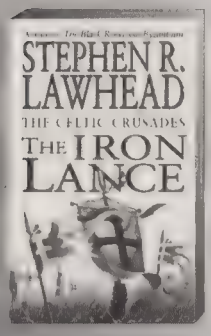

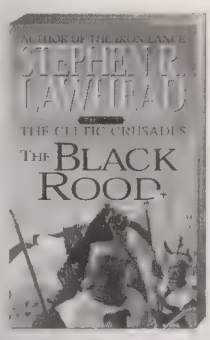

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HUMAN

For the transgression of loving another's wife, Pettio burned for a thousand years.

The law was not that one should suffer in this way; but the woman Pettio loved was the wife of Hospidar, a wizard. He had the power to dispense justice in this way, and so he did, setting the youth aflame in the square of the mountain village of Greggit. His wife he attended to in another fashion.

Pettio found himself rooted in place in the center of the town square. The bouquet of flowers fell from his hands as his knees locked. He cried out, pitching forward, and caught himself on his hands. Since his toes and heels would not budge from the cobblestones, he could not fall, looking instead as if he were playing some game in the fields with the children, as if he pretended he was some animal from distant lands.

"What's wrong, Pettio?" his friend Tremaine asked. "Suddenly feeling cold feet?" Tremaine was a romantic cynic and had both kidded Pettio and encouraged him in his affair with Gwena. "Won't your feet obey you, friend? Do they know something your heart does not?"

"It's so, Tremaine. I can't move from this spot." Pettio pushed against the ground with his hands and managed to right himself. Tremaine gathered the fallen bouquet and handed it to him.

"Not just your feet betray you, friend," Tremaine said. "But now your head is touched with sweat and your cheeks are flushed."

"I am suddenly warm. Ahhh, Tremaine! My fingers burn!"

"Come, Pettio. Let's stop in Gill's Tavern for a drink. To cool the heart and the hands." Tremaine was certain his friend's ailment was of the mind.

Pettio set his teeth and his lips curled back. "My hands are burning, Tremaine! Burning as if too close to a flame. Fetch water!"

Tremaine took Pettio's hand in his own and was alarmed to find the fingers almost too hot to touch. Pulling, Tremaine could not move Pettio from the spot he stood in.

"Take your boots off."

Pettio unlaced his left boot, while Tremaine unlaced the other. But even though the bindings were free, Pettio's feet remained lodged within.

He stood upright and held his hands before him, staring at them accusingly. Tremaine, seeing the expression on his friend's face, ran to the fountain for a bucket of water.

When he returned Pettio was slapping at his ears and head as if trying to put out a fire, and smoke was wisping up from his feet. Tremaine threw the bucket of water at his friend, thoroughly dousing him, but still Pettio patted at himself.

His voice erupted from his throat, a shrill emanation of pain. And now the townsfolk in the square turned to look at the two.

Tremaine said, "Fetch water, everyone! Pettio burns. He burns with invisible flames."

At first few of the people moved, but Pettio's pitiful cries drove them to help.

"I see no flame. Is this some sickness of the mind?" one asked.

"It is devilish magic," another said.

One person pulled water from the well, while a group filled buckets from the fountain. Bucket after bucket they threw on Pettio, but still the man screamed, still smoke wafted from his clothes. Finally his jacket and pants burst into flame, and then his hair and his boots too.

When the people realized that the fire that burned Pettio was no normal one, they ran in fear, fleeing to their homes where they bolted the doors and windows.

Only Tremaine remained, bringing bucket after bucket to cast upon his burning friend, until the heat became so fierce that he could not reach Pettio with a toss of his bucket.

And still the high-pitched keening filled the night, as Pettio was consumed, and yet not consumed, by the flame.

In some ancient cultures the Burning Man meant renewal and hope. Did they ever think of it like this?

ING MAN

By Paul Melko • Illustration by Kyle Anderson

"You will do this thing," Tremaine's wife said. It had stopped being a question sometime in the night.

"I must." Light slipped through the shutters and made a pattern of lines across the bed. Perhaps Mathilda had slept some of the night, but Tremaine had not. The thought of the day's task held him, and it would not let him sleep. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and pulled on his trousers.

"But you have done so much already," Mathilda said.

"And still he suffers. And still he burns."

"Perhaps it was meant to be."

This was the argument that Mathilda always came back to. That Pettio was meant to burn; that it was his fate to be in pain forever. This Tremaine would not accept. The gods had not done this; a man had done it to another man. It was not bad luck, but the malice of one man. To see that man was Tremaine's task today.

"My bag is packed. I kissed the children good-bye last night. I have everything, but my wife's good wishes," Tremaine said.

Mathilda glanced at him, then away, her eyes brimming with tears. "You are a fool, Tremaine. Not for what you are doing. But for thinking you don't have my love and good wishes." Tremaine took her hand, and she continued, "Kiss me once then go. Do what you have to, then return to me. I'll have it no other way."

Tremaine bent and kissed his wife.

He saddled his horse then rode north along the road to Greggit. Weeds long since had overrun the path, but Tremaine had traveled it a hundred times since he'd left the town. No one lived there now, save Pettio. None of the townsfolk could stand the screaming, the constant shrill of the burning man. Greggit had became a desolate town, even though it was still overlooked by Hospidar's castle.

Tremaine had been the last to leave, but he too had left. Even on the edge of town, through shuttered windows, Pettio's keening reached him. Even in Junston, where he now lived and prospered as a chicken wholesaler, the sound of it reached him in dreams. In the dreams, Pettio sometimes called his name.

He had tried to dowse the flames in a number of ways. Barrels of water poured across the ground, but the water was never enough. In winter, he had tried to pile snow around Pettio, but the flame was so hot that the ice melted, running off in rivulets that froze again 10 feet away. He had hired three strong-backed deaf men to divert a stream into the town square. But after two weeks of back-breaking work, the stream's water boiled away as it touched Pettio's feet.

Tremaine had tried petitioning the Wizard's Guild, but to no avail. They refused to sanction one of their own. Nor could any cleric help. The prayers to gods would not free Pettio from his curse. His liege lord, the Lord of Greggit, did not answer Tremaine's letters.

For 30 years, Tremaine had tried to douse his friend Pettio. Nothing had worked. This would be his last trip to Greggit. After this, he could do no more.

Pettio's screaming reached him far down the valley trail. Another person might assume it was the cry of a hawk in the skies, until it failed to stop. Then that person would assume it was the wind. But on a windless day, a person might think it was some demon caught in the rocks or the trees.

But Tremaine knew the sound well: the cry of a tortured soul.

The sound grew as he neared the edge of the village. The horse began to nicker and pull, and finally Tremaine stopped and secured him to a fallen log.

He continued on foot, and before long reached the ruined smithy. The main street took a turn after that, and then another, and then the flame of Pettio's pyre was in sight.

Tremaine's step faltered for a moment and he rested his hands on his knees, breathing heavily as if from exertion, though he was not tired. Slowly he stood upright and continued.

Pettio stood, rooted in place as he had been since the day the curse had been cast, in the center of the town square. His arms were raised above his head, and his entire body was shrouded in orange-red flame. The top of the flame reached 20 feet in the air, as high as it ever had.

His back was to Tremaine, but Tremaine knew that he would be able to make out the rictus-set features of Pettio's face from the other side, the "O" of the mouth as it screamed eternally.

He stopped twice more before reaching Pettio, though it was only a hundred yards from his first sight of him. Tremaine had made this walk a thousand times, but it was never easy. He edged around the heat of the pyre, coming to face his friend.

"Pettio!" he called. "Pettio, can you hear me?" Tremaine tried every time, but never had he been given any indication that Pettio heard him. "It's Tremaine. I've come…. I'm going to beg Hospidar to lift this spell. I'm going to plead for you, Pettio." The scream remained undiminished. "Wish me luck, my friend."

Tremaine turned, his gaze on the heights of the overlooking castle. The wizard had remained, while all the townsfolk had fled. To him, the screams must be music.

The climb was easy, though the path was covered in weeds and scrub. Finally he reached the great iron door of the gate. The knocker was shaped like an eagle's head. After a pause, he seized it and slammed it against the door a dozen times.

"Answer your door, Hospidar! I am here to speak to you! I am here!"

The pounding boomed, and he was suddenly frightened by his own boldness. He was foolhardy to confront a wizard in his castle. His fate would be worse than Pettio's. But before he could turn around and disappear down the path, the door slowly opened inward.

At first Tremaine thought the door had opened by itself, but then he saw a tiny man, but a foot tall, dressed in the coat and pantaloons of a butler, pulling the door open.

"I'm…." Tremaine's voice cracked and he started again. "I'm here to see Hospidar the Wizard."

The little man nodded and waved him inside. As Tremaine passed the butler, he saw that the thing was blind and dumb, its eyes and mouth sewn shut with thread. It made the little man look like a rag doll come to life.

The butler shut the door and led Tremaine through a huge hall, lit with candelabras inset in the walls. Windows were covered by thick drapes and only scraps of light reached the room. The candle flames flickered as he passed them.

The little man mounted a staircase, taking each step as if it were a small cliff. Tremaine felt he should lift the butler to the top of the stairs, but he dared not do anything for fear of offending the homunculus. They climbed three flights of steps, Tremaine following slowing after the straining butler.

At the top of the third flight, the little man led him to a library at the end of a hall. Gesturing him inside, the butler disappeared into the shadows.

The library was empty and dark, covered on all sides with shelves of books. The room smelled dank as if some of the books were moldy. Tremaine stood for a moment then crossed to the small shuttered window on the far wall of the room. He reached to open the shutter, and perhaps let some clean air into the room, when a voice sounded behind him.

"Leave the window closed."

Tremaine whirled, his heart pounding.

Hospidar stood before him dressed in dark robes. His face was pale, the veins apparent under the skin giving him a blue tinge. In the dark room, it seemed as if the wizard was only a head and hands.

"What do you want? A spell, a potion? For revenge, love, profit? But I must warn you my prices are high."

The wizard didn't know why Tremaine was there, and this heartened him. Hospidar was not prescient; he was not all-powerful.

"I've come for none of those things, sir," Tremaine whispered. He coughed, cleared his throat. "I've come for mercy."

"Mercy? Mercy? I have no spells for mercy," Hospidar said, waving his hands in dismissal. "What do you really want?"

"I want you to lift the spell off Pettio."

"Who? You want a curse removed? Go see a witch."

"Pettio is the burning man. The man you set aflame."

The wizard's eyes grew wide. "You come to beg for mercy for the man who led my wife to betrayal?" He raised his arm above his head and fire flared at the knuckles of each finger, coming together in a crackling ball of flame.

Tremaine's legs buckled and he fell back, his mind blackened with fear. He was certain he was about to be set aflame just as Pettio had been.

Hospidar advanced on him, the ball of fire growing, and Tremaine crawled away until his back touched a bookshelf. To spend eternity in the pain of fire filled him with horror, to be like Pettio....

The terror inside Tremaine fled his brain. Instead he felt guilt. The pity with which he viewed his friend was apparent to him now. Perhaps it was his fault, his goading, that had sent Pettio to his doom. But he would not cower before this wizard now, when it was Pettio's last chance.

Tremaine pulled his legs beneath him and stood. He faced Hospidar, resolute.

"I am here to ask you to free Pettio from this curse. He has burned and suffered for 30 years."

The wizard, shorter than Tremaine, was taken aback by the change in demeanor of his guest. The fire at his fingertips disappeared and he stepped away.

"No. He and Gwena have not suffered enough."

"Gwena suffers too? You did the same to your wife? You are a cruel man."

Hospidar waved a dismissive hand. "I did not do the same, but she will suffer as long. And that sentence has only begun. They are cursed for a thousand years."

Tremaine was angry. "How dare you pass sentence upon two who loved? Who are you to be their judge? Do you put yourself above the gods?"

"It is punishment for betrayal." Although he shouted, Hospidar was the one who retreated.

"It is injustice. There is no punishment for love."

"Gwena was my wife. She left me, a great wizard, for a commoner, for a low man. She betrayed my trust. And I as her husband have the right to set the pain." Hospidar tapped his chest. "I am the aggrieved party."

"Do you hear his screams in the night? Do you hear the hoarseness of his throat, a throat that never closes in his pain? I do. Do you hear your wife's cries as well? Or are your ears closed to the pain that you have meted out?"

"Gwena does not scream," Hospidar said softly. "She does not move. But she hears his screams."

"End the curse, Hospidar. End the curse now."

"No," he cried, and he fled the room. "Never."

Tremaine followed him as he ran down the hall and disappeared into another stairwell. This stairwell was circular and wound upward into the heights of a castle tower. Ahead of him, the patter of Hospidar's feet drew him on.

"You must free them, Hospidar. They have paid a hundred times over."

At the top of the tower, the stair opened into a cold room with covered windows on every wall. On a bed lay Gwena, the wizard's wife. She lay with eyes open, but she did not move. Hospidar knelt at the edge of the bed, his body shuddering with sobs.

Tremaine, his breath hanging in the air, approached. Ice clung to Gwena's face and skin. Frost coated her open eyes. She was frozen.

Tremaine listened and heard, even at the height of the tower, even through the heavily draped windows, the keening of Pettio. The burning man's screams reached Gwena's ears as she lay frozen.

"I can't. I can't," whispered Hospidar.

"You must."

"I can't. I can't."

Tremaine's hand gripped Hospidar's shoulder. "You will free them."

"I've tried. But I can't free them." He stood then, and Tremaine saw that the wizard's eyes shed tears. "The spell is too strong, for I cast it in my own anger and drew from places in my soul that are closed to me now. I worked my most powerful magic that day, and this is what I have done." He hung his head. "I have tried to break the spell, but it will not come loose."

Tremaine stood in the cold tower room, his fists balled. He nodded then, his face clouded, his throat dry. Then he turned and walked down the tower stairs, through the hall and into the sun. Its heat might have burned his face for all he knew, but the cold of the tower room would not leave him.

He walked the path down from the castle, into the town, and to the town square. He neared Pettio as close he could, so close that his face stung and his eyes teared.

"Pettio. I have failed you. You will burn for a thousand years!" His voice broke. "I'm so sorry, Pettio. I goaded you on. I did this to you." The tears evaporated from his skin. Tremaine knelt.

"I know you can't hear me, but Gwena lives too under a curse as fierce as yours. She's in the castle, in the highest tower. She hears you scream."

Tremaine stood. "I'm sorry, my friend."

He returned just once, a year later, after the engraver had finished the marking Tremaine commissioned. The stone was a letter to Pettio, and it told him of Gwena's curse. Tremaine took it to the town square, pulled up a dozen cobbles, and placed the stone before Pettio. Perhaps it would last a thousand years.

Tremaine never returned, for the screams were too much for him, though he heard them still in his dreams.

On one of those rare occasions when they were allowed out of the convent, Galea and her classmates went to see the Burning Man in the town square. The catechism room, in which Galea memorized the prayers and songs with the other refugee converts, was stifling in summer, and all were glad to have a few hours' reprieve. And the Burning Man was of interest to all of them.

Bena had whispered to her in the night from the next bunk that the Man was a demon trapped by the god Josit; on three days a year: Ovon's Day, Springtide, and Demon's Eve, he was released from his spot to hunt for bad children. This story had terrified Galea for many nights, but Ovon's Day came and went with no children showing up missing, though more than one, especially bossy Tulla, deserved such a fate as the Burning Man might exact.

Other children said that the Man was just a statue covered in pitch and set aflame each night by the novices, and that the screaming was just wind pumped from the dungeon of Josit's Temple. Or that the Man was a wizard who had miscalculated his spells, resulting in his own fiery death.

Among her class, Galea's white hair and pale skin set her apart. Her family was from a province far north of Jositon, and had been captured by a roving band of Converters. Her father, whom she could vaguely recall, had been slain immediately, but her mother and she had been sent south for formal conversion and training. Galea's mother had died on the trip, and since then Galea had been brought up in the convent next to the temple.

They were all refugee converts, and yet Galea kept herself aloof from all of them, too wary to accept even the smallest gesture of friendship. It led to a reputation as a snob, which she hated, but she was too scared to do anything about it. She walked at the back of the small procession, Cleric Furth leading, the converts trailing.

Galea had often seen the glow of the Burning Man's pyre, and heard the screams of his aching lungs through the window of the dormitory. But never had she been allowed near it; rarely were the converts unsupervised. Her first clear sight of it came as they turned a corner onto Center Street, edged with temple-sanctioned vending stalls, which led to the town center.

The Burning Man's flame was the source of a plume of dark smoke, as if from a cooking fire built by someone who had never known the scarcity of wood in a northern winter. As she neared, Galea made out the curl of the flame, 10 feet above the Burning Man's head. She could

not clearly distinguish his facial features, except for his mouth, which remained open, exhaling a carrying moan of pain and torture.

"You, children!" cried Cleric Furth. "Away from here, now."

A clump of street boys scattered at the reproach from the cleric, and Galea saw that they carried sticks on which hung fruits and sausages. They were using the heat of the Burning Man to cook their food.

"Heretical urchins! Wait till I get you in catechism class! I'll remember you!"

The class bunched up behind the cleric, ignoring the boys, staring instead at the Burning Man. Galea, so enthralled by the sight, edged within touching distance of her classmates, ignoring them for the moment.

"You stink," someone whispered, pushing her away. It was Tulla, the class bully. "Get away from me, you convert."

Galea couldn't understand why Tulla called her that; they all were converts.

Cleric Furth clapped his hands. "Girls. Attention. I will now tell the tale of the Burning Man.

"When the People of Josit had come from the south to this land, they found that it was good, and Josit told them to build a great city here.

"Only one among them thought that there might be better land elsewhere. He had heard stories of lands where greater gods dwelt, whose people lived lives of decadence, and he wished that from Josit as well.

"He said to the Cleric, 'Let us move on. There are better lands than these.'

"The Cleric replied, 'This land Josit has given us. This town will be called Jositon.'

"The man said, 'This land is cold in winter, hot in summer, and the rains will wash away our crops in spring.'

"'Josit will provide for us.'

"'How can Josit control the weather?'

"The Cleric was very unhappy with the man. 'You doubt the power and will of Josit. You must sing the Seventeenth Psalm, The Breadth of Josit's Will, for three weeks in the town square at sunset.'

"'I will not do this thing.' And he disobeyed the Cleric's order. Instead of singing the Psalm, he stood with people gathered around him and told them that they must follow him to a better land.

"The timid and weak of heart were swayed, and so Josit punished him. The man was set aflame for his insolence, and today he still burns.

"Remember this story, for Josit is powerful and will not allow disobedience."

The square was quiet for a moment, save for the crackle of the flame.

Then Bena asked, "How long will he burn?"

"Forever!" shouted Cleric Furth, and the girls shrunk away in fright.

Someone else said, "Will Josit not forgive him?"

"Never! The Burning Man made his choice."

Galea spoke without thinking, "It seems unfair."

The children turned at her voice, perhaps unsure of who had spoken. The Cleric glared.

"You do not see the justice of the Burning Man's penance because you are a weak convert. Come to my office tomorrow at dawn for additional instruction."

Galea's throat constricted. "Instruction" from Furth in private was never that. He would use the strap on her naked back, and then touch her where she did not wish to be touched.

But she could do nothing more than stare back at the priest, and fear what was to come.

Bena had a dream of a snake encircling a mountain, crushing it to rubble, and the priests proclaimed that the snake was Josit and the mountain the Infidels, and that she had been truly confirmed into the faith. She went to live with a cobbler's family and promised that she would come and visit them, but never did.

One by one, the other girls had dreams or visions that were interpreted as signs of confirmation, and slowly the catechism class shrunk. Galea had dreams, but they were of fire and pain. Sometimes she dreamed of the Burning Man, calling her name, telling her to run.

She told Furth her dreams, hoping that they were enough to justify confirmation, but Furth always said the dreams were too vague, and Josit had no power in fire. He would beat her then, or touch her, so she stopped telling him of the dreams.

Soon the last girl had been confirmed, and Galea was alone in the long dormitory. Furth called her to his study immediately.

"You are not taking well to the teaching of Josit," he said, removing his cloak, displaying the white of his belly.

"I don't think he wants me," Galea said, not caring if this brought a slap.

"Josit wants all his children, his sheep."

"I still dream of the Burning Man. It means Josit does not want me," she said. She looked away from the naked priest, at the square of sunlight in the middle of the bookcase. "I'm wicked."

"Well, you are still useful to his flock," said Josit. "Even if you are not of his flock. Now kneel."

Galea did not yield to the hand on her shoulder. "No," she said, her stomach churning at her rebellion. "If Josit does not want me, then I'll leave."

"Leave? Nonsense. You are a convert. Now, do the only thing you do reasonably well."

"I won't," she said, and she turned, pulling open the huge door into the study. She dashed from the room, and behind her Furth yelled.

But he did not reach and clutch her as she expected he would. Daring a glance behind her, she saw that Furth had not emerged from the study. He was naked after all, and that gave her a few moments' head start.

Galea ran through the halls, past a line of startled brothers and sisters in gray initiate smocks. She ran down the stairs from the priests' quarters to the inner gate.

The guard there did nothing to stop her from running through the courtyard. Nor did the two monks at the outer gate. They watched her with bland eyes, a vacant look that frightened her.

No one moved to stop her, and she suddenly wondered why she had not run away long before. It had never seemed possible for a failed convert.

The street she took led to the town center and there before her was the Burning Man. She stopped abruptly, her legs aching.

Through the flame, he seemed to look at her, to see her.

"I dream of you," she said. "I see you burning, I hear you scream." She held her arms out, a reflection of the Burning Man's pose, and stepped forward, letting the heat of the flame wash over her.

Galea's cheeks stung, but she took another step forward. The wind sucked at her dress, urged her to come farther.

"All the others dreamed of Josit, but I dreamed of you. You who are a victim of Josit's justice. What does it mean?"

"Galea!"

She didn't hear Furth, until he placed a hand upon her shoulder.

"It's a hundred beads for you tonight, young lady!" he shouted, spinning her around. "You will pay for this."

"Why won't Josit punish me? Why won't he set me ablaze?"

"That is for heretics, not naughty little girls."

"Is it for priests who touch little girls?" she asked.

Furth stumbled back. "Come with me, you filthy child."

"No. I want Josit to punish me. I want him to set me aflame. Now." She screamed at the sky. "Rot in Hell, Josit!" For not wanting her, for not wanting her mother and father, for letting a creature like Furth exist.

Wagging a finger, Furth said, "Do not test your god, child. Or you will face the consequence."

"Burn me now, Josit. Burn me now." She held her face to the sun for a moment, then dropped her arms. "Josit doesn't want me. So I'm leaving."

Continued on page 94

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DARK SEED,
In ancient times women had to take power where they could find it. But sometimes they found it in just the right place.
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DARK STONE

They have already started on Father's stone, right after the blowing of the horns. The first cut by Painted Oengus was for the broken spear because Father was the clan's greatest warrior. He was called Bridei's Hound because he had so often run before the king. And Bridei's shield, because he put his body over the king's when the spears were the thickest. A great warrior, and brother-in-law to the king, but not, alas, great enough. He had a mere man's skin after all, and a Northumbrian's knife had pierced it easily. Such a small slice for life to have leaked out.

After we watched Painted Oengus set his chisel to the stone, we came here to lay out Father's body for burial. I fasten his cloak around his shoulders with his best brooch, the one Mother had made for him to honor his first battle. I set my long finger over the wound in his neck. It covers the wound completely. Stepmother shouts at me and I take my hand away. But not before I feel how small Father's death is.

I walk away from the corpse table then, because Stepmother shouts and because I cannot stand to see her weeping over Father as if she loved him. She married him for status alone after my mother—Bridei's sister—died. But Stepmother never showed him softness while he lived. It shames us all how she carries on now, anointing his cold flesh with her hot tears. I think she worries that no one will ask for her in marriage once the mourning year is over, or that Bridei will not allow it, wishing her to mourn Father for the rest of her life. She has not shown herself fertile and her tongue is sharp enough to cut off her lips. Who would marry a barren woman, no matter how tall she is, how beautiful.

I go from the hall where his body lies and find my way to the byre to be with the cows who are at least warm and smell of the earth, not flower scents ground in a mortar and warmed behind a woman's ears.

Cattle cannot cry falsely. Indeed, they cannot cry at all. Nor can they rail at me. I like that.

No one bothers me here, in the round stone byre. I am, after all, only a third daughter of a dead wife of a dead warrior. I am not beautiful like my sister Alba of the White Arms who looks like our mother. I am not a fine weaver like my sister Golden Eithni of the Upright Loom, who has our mother's skills. Both of them are already married, and to warriors nearly as great as Father had been.

Me—I am no one. Bryony, the Dark Seed. I am short and have Father's black hair and dark skin, his broad hands and large feet. Although it is true I have his knowledge of the land and a fierce heart, those are not a woman's skills. I am already 13 and no one has spoken for me yet.

I doubt any will.

Really, cows are better company than men.

But I do not want to stay with the cows, whose conversation is so limited. So I head back to where Painted Oengus is at work on the next carving, using as his guide the pictures tattooed on his arms, his ankles, his chest. I know that next he will chisel out a sword, then a horse or a chariot, Father's honors as a warrior.

There will likely be a salmon as well. We are the Salmon people, my father's mother having come from among the tribes of the Great Silver River where salmon were once so thick, one could cross to the far side by walking on their backs. Or so she used to tell me.

And there will be other signs—whatever Bridei instructs. He is king and Father was his Hound and his Shield after all.

Even Stepmother cannot override Bridei's wishes.

Sometimes I wish that I could be king. But I am a girl. My wishes should be for a husband and children, for yellow corn, fat cows, a tight loom—as my sisters do not hesitate to remind me.

Bridei had sent for Painted Oengus all the way from the Black Firth to make Father's stone and he had begun the work at once. Now he is kneeling before the stone, holding his great chisel and pounding it with a wooden hammer. The one finished picture—of the broken spear—stands out boldly. I think he has rubbed it with red clay to bring out the lines. Father's blood had dried to that color. I know it well. I washed the wound with my tears first, water after.

The second carving—a hound with its hair streaming behind—has already been outlined on the stone. Painted Oengus is a careful carver, but he is quick, too. The best of all The People, so Eithni says.

I stand behind him, peering over his shoulder. Since Stepmother is not here to yell at me, no one will stop me from watching.

Painted Oengus is a short man, though no shorter than Father. His hair—the color of the flaming sunset skies—is shot through with strands of white. He hums as he works. It is not a tune I know. But then Painted Oengus comes from afar. His bards would not be our bards.

I dare a question. "Will there be a mirror?" A mirror would mean that my stepmother has paid for the stone. Mirrors are women's signs. As are combs.

He grunts, which is not an answer.

Just then Bridei is at my shoulder. "There will be no mirror, Bryony," he tells me. "I have paid for the stone and the carver." He strikes his chest for emphasis. "This stone is the Clan's doing, not the outland wife's. Your father will have a warrior's signs because he was my brother-in-law and a man. In life and in death."

I nod, unable to speak, the word *death* filling my head.

"Now go home and help with the mourning feast or that woman will have a fit and call down her dark gods upon us." He says *that woman* with much bitterness. "And that will dishonor my Shield."

Well, he is the king and must be obeyed. In peace as well as in war. Unlike some clans over the sea I have heard of who are ruled in peace by Speakers and only in war follow their king.

So I go home to the long house, the house that was once my Father's and is no more.

When I arrive, Stepmother screams at me that I have failed to get the fire started or fetch in the water. Of course we both knew that there are servants to do all this, and they have *not* failed. The fire is roaring in the hearth. In the wooden bucket, water brims to the top. The table is already set with platters piled high with slabs of venison and boar. There is ale in the mugs. Salads of sorrel nestle in bowls, as well as boiled scurvy grass and nuts finely cracked, and dried berries and plums from last year's fruiting.

But Stepmother needs to take out her worry in anger, and as I am Father's only child still at home, I am convenient.

Her voice is so loud, it carries throughout the settlement, and she shames us both. The guests already starting across the grass to our house hear her shrilling. I can see through the open door the pain and embarrassment on their faces.

I run outside past the guests, back to the byre again, knowing I will not starve with cow's milk to hand. And I can sleep there, warmed by cow's breath and my father's second-best cloak, which I have hidden in a rock safe for just such a purpose. It is not my first time sleeping away from my Stepmother's house. It will not be my last.

My sister Alba finds me.

"Bryony," she says, "do not shame us more by absenting yourself from the feast." She puts her arms about me. I love the familiar smell of breast milk and slightly damp woolen cloth. Alba has a new baby, another girl, a sweet little thing named Ionia. But still I pull away from her and shake my head.

"I hate our stepmother. I will not go back."

"She is nothing, that one," Alba continues. We can both still hear Stepmother. "She is less than nothing. A woman with an empty womb and no future. Soon sent back to her own people with only her jewels, if the gods are merciful."

I nod. Of course Alba is right. But still I hesitate.

"Come back to the feast, Bryony," she says. "For Father. For his honor." She puts her small white hand on my broader, darker hand.

"For Father," I whisper, and leave the cows.

Even Stepmother cannot spoil the feast, though she tries. She complains about me, about Father who left her, about the rough lives of The People compared to her own clan, about the weather and the wind and the little black bugs that bite. It is her way and nobody but me really listens anymore.

There is plenty to eat, which honors Father. Alba and Eithni contribute breads and small cakes. Our cousins—Father's sisters' families—have slaughtered a cow, and not an old one, either.

Every warrior who has fought by Father's side brings a gift: cloth, combs, silver torques and chains and pins. We will choose the best to bury with him, the rest will reside in my stepmother's coffers.

Until she leaves.

I keep that thought to myself, warming my cold heart with it. *Until she leaves.*

The Speaker has made a prayer for Father's passage and the bard sings a new song—"Song of the Hound and Shield" he calls it.

Some of the words I will never forget:

Take our Hound to the bright lands,
Let him course through sweet meadows,
Oh, let him follow the deer.

The men cheer at each verse. The women call out Father's name and say his virtues. And Bridei makes toast after toast. Bridei and his children have brought along enough strong ale to drown the entire clan.

Everybody drinks, Stepmother most of all, for she is trying to keep up with Bridei, to show that she is her husband's equal and not to be sent back like a useless slave. But at last she collapses, her head on the table.

Bridei winks at me and signals his children to carry her off to bed.

I smile back at him. But I am worried, too. Without Father to be Bridei's Shield—for he has no sons and no more brothers—who will guard him in the next fight?

At last the guests go, at least those who are still standing. The rest will snore away the night at our long table. I cannot ask the servants to clean up till morning. That would bring dishonor to those who have feasted Father. They have to be left to their dreams.

I go outside for some fresh air.

The stars above are many but there is no moon. I walk past the byre, past the houses of the clan. Climbing up the stairs to the great walls of the settlement, I adjust the shawl on my shoulders, pinning it tight against the chill with the silver and red enamel brooch that was my mother's.

There are no guards on the wall this night. I have left them sleeping at our table.

As I walk, I pray silently: *Let* me *be Bridei's Shield now that Father is gone. Let* me *guard his back.*

The gods do not answer. I am not a Speaker, after all. Only Speakers get to talk to the gods and expect an answer. Of course our Speaker would warn me, had he heard me, that the gods' answers are not always what we wish. But I do not care and this time say my prayer aloud. "Let me take Father's place as Bridei's shield."

For a long time after I stand on the wall, gazing out across the rolling land. Far away, on the other side of the long meres, are our enemies, the Northumbrians. Father's killers.

I think about them, the dark warriors with their iron hats. I think about them and hate them so fiercely, there is a white-hot flame searing beneath my breastbone.

Suddenly a strange light streaks across the sky, making a sound like a thousand cicadas. I tremble and fall to my knees, for when a star travels from one side of the world to the other, it is a sign from the gods. It means a journey of greatness.

Will it be my journey? I wonder. Or does it signify Father's trip to the underworld?

When I look down again at the rolling land I see someone running along the ridge. A man. It is too dark to see if he is one among many, but he is not wearing an iron hat. He is not sneaking as do Northumbrians. He is running tall, like one of The People.

I hurry down from the wall and go straight to the king's house, knocking frantically at the door.

Bridei himself opens it.

"There is a man," I say. "Coming. Coming…." I cannot get it out all at once, for I am almost out of breath. "No guards… on the wall … But I … I saw only … one!" I draw in an enormous breath and finish with a burst, "One running man on the ridge!"

Bridei does not smile. He reaches for his great spear that stands at the door, and shouts back to his household. "Get the men up!" He turns to me. "It would be just like the Southerners to attack at night. And when we are feasting our dead. They have no honor." He hefted his spear. "Just *one* you say?"

"I could see no others."

He hands me a knife. "Are you your father's daughter?"

I nod. I have gutted deer and boar. I guess I can gut a man.

Bridei shouts again. I hear people stirring in the darkness behind him. Then he looks at me.

"Wake your sisters' husbands and the rest."

"And the guards sleeping at our table?" I ask.

He reaches a hand out to tousle my hair. "Throw water on them if necessary. The gods will understand. There will be no dishonor in it."

I run off to do his bidding.

My sisters' husbands are easy to wake. They get up from their pallets and immediately take spears and bows, though at night a bow is almost useless. Still, morning will be on us soon.

The men asleep at our house are more difficult. I shout but no one stirs. I do not touch them. They are men and I am an unmarried girl.

There is little water left in the bucket and no time to get more. I pour good ale on two of them and leave them to wake the rest. Then I hurry back to see Bridei and his household guards rushing out of the gate.

Painted Oengus, who has slept in the king's house, stands looking at them.

"Why are you not off fighting with them?" I ask.

"Not my fight," he says in his grunt voice. "I be no fighter."

"You carry a spear," I tell him with passion, nodding at his left hand. I show him my knife.

He throws back his head and laughs loudly. "Must have protection from wild beast. They do not know I be great carver." He hits his chest with the flat of his hand.

I am furious. "Do not laugh at me. Not when we are about to fight for our clan."

Painted Oengus stops laughing, though there is still a smile on his face. "Little fierce one," he says, "your clansmen do not go to fight. They go to greet runner. He be alone, streaking across ridge like great star."

I gasp. He has used the same words as I. Is it another sign? I do not know how to ask that question, so I ask another: "Who is it?"

"How to know from here?" He puts out a hand. "Come."

I take his hand. It is as big as Father's.

We walk outside the gates, but I am careful to keep my knife at the ready.

"My father was Bridei's shield," I tell Oengus.

"Yes."

"I must be his shield now."

He looks down at me and smiles again. "Then Bridei be well kept."

Our men have surrounded the running man, who is tall and straight and has hair as dark as mine tied back with a leather thong. His trews are so filthy, I am not able to see the pattern of his clan. His chest is bare and there is much thick hair curling there. A silver cross bar hanging from a silver chain nestles in that hair.

Bridei's guards take him by the arm and the running man does not pull away. Instead he slaps himself on the chest, right over the silver cross bar, with his free hand and speaks what must have been his name, but the word is strange in my ears, sounding like water over stone. Then he spies Painted Oengus, and says something more.

Painted Oengus answers. When he speaks the running man's tongue, his voice does not grunt, which makes me wonder.

The guards bring the man toward Bridei. Gripping my knife, I edge forward.

Close up, the running man has strange eyes, one blue, one brown. Perhaps he is a Speaker. Perhaps he has been sent by the gods.

But, I wonder, *are they our gods—or his?*

He breaks free of the guards and runs toward Bridei. I race before

him and bring up my knife.

But in one swift movement, he has the knife from my hand, my hand in his grip. He kneels before Bridei, speaking in his watery tongue. My hand in his feels as if it is in the cleft of a tree. I cannot move the fingers nor take the hand away. I have but one choice. I turn under him, nearly breaking my hand off at the wrist, and throw myself upon his back. I angle my free arm around his neck.

"Bridei," I cry out, "I am your Shield now. Strike this man while you can!" Though we all know that to strike the man, the spear will have to go through me first. But I am ready. I, Bryony, the Dark Seed.

Painted Oengus comes forward, both hands stretched before him. "Do not strike, oh king. This man known to me. He be king's son. He asks sanctuary...." I do not move. Nor does anyone else. Even the stars above us, I believe are still.

Then the Speaker comes forward. He stands at the running man's head. "Tell us again your name." He slaps his own chest with the question. "Name?"

The running man does not move, does not try to stand with me on his back, but says clearly, "Eanfrid."

And this time I hear it complete. It runs through my head the way the star ran across the sky. "Eanfrid."

His back is cold beneath me. I feel the rumble of his voice through my bones. He speaks longer now, and again Painted Oengus tells us his words.

"I am Eanfrid, oldest of Ethelfrid's sons. Our kinsman has killed our father and stolen his crown. Let me live here, under your protection and name, till I can take back what is mine."

Bridei listens, his hand tangling in his beard.

My wrist is ready to break, but still I do not move.

Then Bridei speaks. "Bryony, climb down. I do not need your death. I want your life. But for your courage, I will give you a boon. Only ask it and it is yours."

I have nothing to ask, except that my Father be returned to me, and this Bridei cannot do. Or that Stepmother be sent away at once. But to ask that would not be honorable. Besides, it will be done in time. I need not waste my boon on her.

Bridei is still speaking. "This man, Eanfrid, will stay. Though the Northumbrians have no honor, killing their own kings, we will treat this Eanfrid as if he is a man of The People once he has learned our ways. Then will he have honor." I see he has difficulty saying this. The newness of it makes him uncomfortable.

Painted Oengus tells Eanfrid what Bridei has said and Eanfrid lets go of my hand. I fall off his back, making a sound like a cow in labor. He moves to help me up and I shrug away his hand. His two-colored eyes look soft and hurt. He tries a smile. His teeth are very white and even. I see he is younger than I first thought. Not long from his boyhood.

Then Alba's husband puts me behind him, as if I need hiding. I, who have just thrown myself on an enemy's back. He means well, but he only sees me as a younger sister to his wife, and forgets that I am my Father's daughter.

I hold my wrist where the pain is greatest and walk back to the hall of mourning while the others go on to Bridei's house to celebrate the newest member of our clan. They will feast him as if he is newborn. Both men and women.

In the hall of mourning, I kneel before the corpse, who is only now beginning to stink. "Father," I say, "they have traded a runner for a warrior. A Northumbrian for a man of The People."

He gives no answer, nor do I expect any.

My wrist is aching, but my heart is aching more. Things are changing and I do not like them to change.

"Father," I say, putting a hand on the cold, now-unfamiliar flesh, "tell me what to do."

I hear a rumble, like words coming from a cave. The hall suddenly seems full of mist. I cannot see. My wrist hurts. I turn toward the door, fearing fire.

But the words do not come from the door; they come from behind me. From Father. It is not possible but it is true. Father's ghost speaks to me, his voice sounding as if it comes from the bottom of our settlement's great well.

"Be Bridei's Shield," he says. "Ask your boon from Bridei. Have him give you the Northumbrian's head and hands to send back to the new king of his land."

I fall down onto my sore wrist. My head hits the ground. I bite my tongue almost in two. There are stars over me, shooting along the rooftrees of the hall.

Enthni finds me lying outstretched before Father's corpse. I am on my back, weeping.

She does not ask. She thinks she knows what has happened. She does not.

With her help, I rise and she makes me drink fresh water from a cup. My mouth is full of blood. I spit it out and then we go to Bridei's house. They are still raising glasses of ale to the new man. He is swathed like a baby. Each woman of The People holds him for a moment to her breast.

I walk in. My wrist hurts, my head hurts, my tongue hurts, and I no longer care.

"Bridei," I say thickly, "I have come to claim that boon."

The man, Eanfrid, hears the strange power in my voice. For a moment there is fear in his eyes, then hardness. He will be brave whatever I ask.

I walk up to him and put my sore hand on his shoulder. "Give me this man."

"He is yours," Bridei says casually, but there is a slyness in his eyes. Honor demands he honor my request. He thinks he knows what I want.

He does not.

I tell him. "Give me this man as husband. Two royal lines will be wed that way. I and all my children will thus be your Shield forever."

Bridei's mouth gets small and round. He thinks a long time. He does not like change any more than I. He has already made one change this night. Now I have asked for another. He thinks about the Northumbrians who have killed one king. He thinks how easily they would kill another.

Beneath my hand Eanfrid's flesh is warm. He does not know what we are speaking of, but he knows. I can feel his knowledge and his strength. It takes courage to run from all you know and to seek sanctuary with your enemies. It takes courage and will. He must be a stronger man than his father. I am counting on this.

At last Bridei speaks. "Your advice is as good as your Father's."

I remember the hollow voice speaking to me of death. The old way.

"Better," I say, and smile. Once for Bridei to whom I owe honor, once to Father to whom I owe memory, and once to my husband to whom I owe love. ❧

Historical note: *Eanfrid was the oldest of the three sons of Ethlefrid, King of Bernica, the northernmost of the English kingdoms, i.e., Northumbria. When Ethelfrid was defeated by his cousin Edwin in 617, his sons were sent into exile along with many other young nobles until Edwin's death in 633. There the boys grew up among the Picts and Scots. All three of the brothers were converted to Christianity and baptized during their exiles. According to one source, Eanfrid "took the politically important step of marrying into the Pictish royal family. We do not know the name of his wife, but ... she bore him a son, Talorgan, who was to become King of the Picts...." Years later, in 685, under a different Bridei (son of Bili) the Picts were to slaughter the Northumbrian enemy at the Battle of Nechtansmere and kill the Northumbrian king.*

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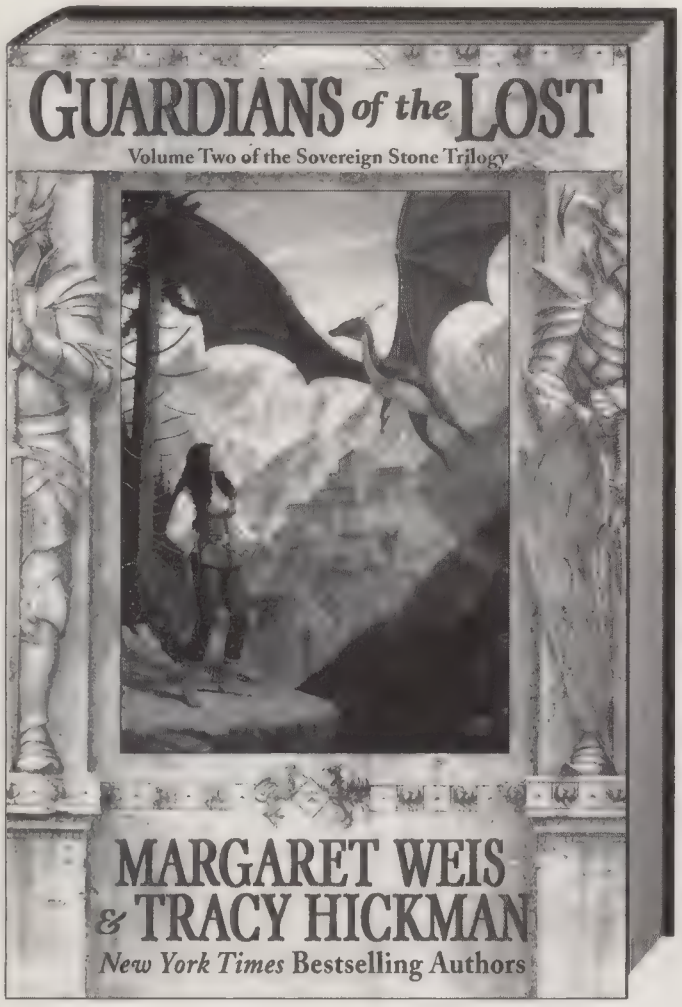
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Creation requires freedom —
freedom of spirit, freedom of soul,
freedom of body.

The Muse

Kate had always threatened to run away, and now she'd done it. She'd run until she reached the end of the Earth....

Well no, she thought, second-guessing herself yet again. This hotel wasn't at the end of the Earth. The Earth went on forever, round and round, until you passed yourself struggling along the road. What she'd come to was the end of her wits.

Through the window of the lounge she saw a green lawn stretching down to a bay where jagged black rocks looked like spears thrust into the silvery sand of the beach. On a promontory to the left stood a ruined castle, its broken walls and towers rising from the rock the way memory, desire, and regret rose in the back of Kate's mind. From the horizon rose the humped peaks of the Outer Hebrides, blue against the only slightly less solid blue of the sky. Huge white and gray clouds sailed overhead.

Behind her, dishes clattered. Kate looked around. Of course she'd ordered tea. Here, tea was as much medication as beverage.

By Lillian Stewart Carl
Illustration by Eric Dinyer

The waitress was a young woman with the ample figure of a Mediterranean mother-goddess figurine. A name tag reading "Lucy" clung to the fabric above her breast like a skier poised for a downhill run. She set the tea tray down with a smile.

Kate picked up the metal teapot and almost dropped it. "Whoa, it's hot!"

"Oh aye," Lucy agreed, and started collecting the empty cups from the next table.

Her fingertips tingling, Kate poured, added milk and sugar, and started to drink. Steam rose from the cup, misting her glasses. No, she'd scald her mouth. Better wait.

She pulled her notebook out of her purse and opened it to the first page. A blank page, each ruled line like the bars of a cell. She held her pencil poised above the paper, waiting for inspiration, or, failing that, gravity, to pull it downward.

"You're a writer then?" asked Lucy.

"No, not really."

"Getting the words down, that's magic." Lucy vanished out the door.

Magic, Kate repeated silently.

She'd spent years nurturing the dreams of others. Her own had been set aside, if not forgotten, reduced to a few words furtively jotted down on the back of the grocery list or a note from the school. Those words that managed to rise above the level of furtive had earned a handful of rejection slips which she'd hidden away like her kids tried to do with a bad report card.

Now, the children were grown and the husband shed, all very politely, very civilized—there was nothing wrong with the marriage, its shelf life had simply expired. Now Kate had come at last to Scotland, to the island of Skye, chasing the myth and legend she craved—Dunvegan, with its stories of fairy flags and pipers playing unearthly music, or Dunscaith with its stories of a warrior queen.

And here she was at an ordinary little hotel on the farthest rim of the island. Here she was just as trapped as if she'd stayed home.

Outside the ocean was a sheen of sunlight on indigo. Waves ran into the beach, one after the other, paling to green and then, as the elements of air and water mingled, becoming a creamy froth licking at the sand. The ocean's rhythmic murmur mingled with the rattle of crockery from the nether regions of the hotel. Kate imagined a housewife having sex and planning the next day's meals at the same time.

With a wry shake of her head she tried the tea again. Its milky-sweet heat warmed her body. Thirstily she drank the pot dry. Then she put the still-virgin notebook away.

She found Lucy installed behind the front desk in the hall—she wasn't just waitress, it seemed, but owner, operator, and presiding genius as well. "How much for the tea?"

"Two pound."

Kate handed over two heavy pound coins, like the coins the ancient Greeks would put on the eyes of the dead so their souls could pay for the ferry into Hades.

"Thank you," said Lucy. "Are you away, then?"

"Yes, thanks," Kate returned, with more certainty than she felt. "Where's the rest room, please?"

"Eh?"

"The lavatory? The loo?"

"Oh. Just there." Lucy nodded toward a sign on the wall reading brusquely, "Toilets."

Kate found the ladies' off a back corridor. The toilet had a tank high on the wall, activated by a pull handle. In the U.S. it'd be draped with a velvet rope, for exhibition only, not for use.

This was meant to be used. Had been used, as a matter of fact—shit smeared the inside of the bowl. How odd for a women's toilet. It was the male of the species who usually marked his territory so casually, unafraid to make a mess. The female of the species, now, was a lot more squeamish about squatting down and confessing to mortality.

What if Lucy was the next woman to come in here? What if she thought it was Kate who'd left the toilet so dirty? Kate pulled the handle, but even the rush of water couldn't wash away the consequences of appetite.

When she walked out of the front door of the hotel the cold sea wind hit her cheeks like a slap. *Thanks, I needed that.* The afternoon sun hung in the northern sky. The islands on the horizon were more dream than real. Now what? Should she take a ferry across to that horizon or keep on cleaning toilets?

Music ebbed and flowed on the wind like the tide on the beach, aching like a broken heart. Kate looked around, past the black and white sign reading "Kilcolm Hotel" to the castle on its headland. Human figures moved through the ruins. A piper must be playing there, like the costumed pipers who played outside Urquhart Castle or in Glencoe. It was a fair exchange—they were hungry for the tourist bucks, marks, francs, yen, and the tourists were hungry for a mythical past.

The shrill music was ancient, wild, uncanny, both a banshee's wail and Ulysses' sirens' compelling call. Turning away from the parking lot and the beach, Kate followed a muddy path upward. To her right the breakers foamed around stones sharp as teeth. Ahead of her rose the walls of the castle, stained with the same lichens and bird-droppings as the bedrock. She couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Maybe the castle hadn't been built but grown.

White sea birds whirled above the ruins, screeching brashly. The music stopped. Kate stepped through the shadow of an archway onto a green lawn no larger than the hotel lounge.

Around her the walls rose from battered parapets to a three-story tower, its windows dark slits, its roofline a serrated edge against the sky. Pinkish-purple foxgloves sprouted from crannies where the rock had shifted and split. The icy wind couldn't quite overwhelm the castle's miasma of mud, mold, and seaweed. Well, not all castles could be Camelot, edited again and again over the years.

At the base of the tower two men equipped with hard hats and clipboards huddled beside an arch traced in stone—oh, a filled-in doorway. Several people stood braced, figurehead-style, on top of the walls. Below them the cliff fell sheer to the sea. Back home a place like this would have railings and warning signs. If someone slipped and fell you might get hit with a lawsuit. You had to be careful. If you took risks, you could get hurt. And if you did get hurt it was always someone else's fault.

Music burst behind Kate's back. The rush of sound pulled every follicle on her body erect. In a spasm of something between terror and delight, she spun around.

There was the piper, standing beside the gate just where sun met shadow. His short-cropped red hair rippled in the wind and his red and green kilt fluttered around his knees. Strong knees, solid thighs, calves curving smoothly into thick woolen socks and sturdy boots—his clothing was not costume but everyday wear.

His body was so lean and wiry Kate was surprised he could expel enough air to inflate the bag nestled against his denim jacket. But Gabriel's trumpet would probably emit fewer decibels. He was playing a lament, an intricate, almost tuneless series of notes in a minor key. Each note lingered so long, drawing itself out thinner and thinner, or else darted somewhere so unexpected, Kate felt unbalanced. She took an abrupt step forward.

The corner of his mouth tilted slightly even as his lips stayed firm

on the mouthpiece. Long eyebrows arched up and down, one after the other, above startlingly blue eyes. Embarrassed at staring, she found two more pound coins and dropped them into the shortbread tin at his feet with a sound like that of an anchor chain rattling down.

He glanced at them, the sunlight glinting off the gold hoop in his ear, then looked up and winked. Kate essayed a weak smile. His eyes smiled back. She felt the reverberation of the drones in her stomach and the melody of the chanter down her back, as though the piper was fingering her spine instead of his instrument.

She forced herself to make an about-face and walk away across the tongue of turf enclosed by the ruined walls.

A uniformed guide ushered two people through the gate. "So where is this?" demanded the middle-aged man in a flat American accent. His toadlike shape was remarkably similar to that of the elderly woman who held his arm. Mother and son, probably. "Anything happen here?"

THERE WAS THE PIPER, STANDING BESIDE THE GATE JUST WHERE SUN MET SHADOW.

"This is Dunshian Castle," the guide recited. "Here a chief of the MacDonalds forced his daughter to marry a chief of clan MacLeod. She had two sons, MacDonald's only grandchildren. One day the MacDonald and his son-in-law returned from the hunt. The daughter cooked and served them up a feast, there, in the hall. ..." He gestured toward the tower. The two faces turned upward, maybe imagining a long torchlit room hung with tapestries when even at its finest this castle's hall would have been barely warmer and dryer than its dungeon. And yet its occupants probably sat there saying, "Life can't get any better than this."

"When they'd eaten," the guide concluded, "the daughter, the wife, the mother told the men she'd served them up her sons. Then she threw herself out the window onto the rocks below."

The tourists' eyes glittered. "Is that true?"

"Oh aye, that it is."

Sure it was true, Kate thought. A true story, even if the events had never actually happened.

"Then there was Hugh MacDonald, accused of plotting against his cousin. The cousin locked him up in a dungeon with a plate of salt beef and a pitcher. Hugh ate the beef and turned to the pitcher. It was empty. They say he went mad from the thirst before he died of it. But he never confessed."

The tourists grimaced happily. There was nothing quite so entertaining as a ghastly event that happened to someone else, reminding you life could always get worse.

The piper ended his lament with a long drawn-out note like a moan, the sound fading and dying. Birds shrieked. One of the men by the blocked door tapped his trowel against the stone. Kate wondered if they were archaeologists in quest of the physical rather than the metaphysical past.

"Then," the guide said, "there was the wee woman tourist who saw a ghostly army marching across the grounds of the hotel, just there."

"Oooh," said the mother. But that was a little close to home. "It's getting late, we need to be going, we have dinner reservations in Portree."

"Right," said the guide, pulling a set of car keys from his pocket.

Kate didn't know about her compatriots, but she'd never pass another golden-arches-type MacDonald's without remembering Dunshian and its gastronomical horror stories. There was more to eating than fueling the flesh.

The piper launched into a reel. In the music was the coil and swoop of the sea birds, the melody returning again and again to the same double note of affirmation, joyful in spite of—or because of—its minor key. Kate had to keep herself from breaking into a dance step.

Even the lumpish tourists shuffled a bit as they headed toward the gate. The guide said, "A piper was playing for a wedding on a Saturday night. The guests feasted and danced. When it came midnight and the Sabbath, the minister warned them to stop. They didn't. And the guests turned to stones, all standing in a circle round the tall one that's the piper."

With a dubious glance at Dunshian's far-from-petrified piper, the tourists vanished out the gate. They didn't throw any money into the tin. Kate groped in her handbag—you had to pay the piper. You had to recognize the power and magic of music, even if, like the mythical minister, you were jealous of it. Even if you thought you had to protect your flock from their own instincts.

The piper's stiff fingers bounded up and down the chanter like the legs of a ballet dancer. Kate threw another coin into the tin and again his eyes smiled. A ray of sun struck through the gate even as the shadow of the walls reached greedily eastward. The archaeologists consulted in low voices over a roll of paper that flapped in the wind like a sail.

Kate had had some vague idea of going back to Sligachan or Portree herself tonight. The hotels were bigger, with more amenities, but also with more of her own countrymen, like the tourists in the chauffeured car. Portree was closer to where Skye was tied to the mainland by a graceful and yet stern concrete span. This is the world, it seemed to say. Make the most of it.

She'd made the most of the drive up the coast, stopping at cliffs and waterfalls and amazing geological displays—rock, good solid rock, sustaining the springy turf like bones sustained the flesh—but she wasn't sure she wanted to tackle that same narrow road in the dusk....

Stop rationalizing. She liked it here, where the craggy hills were softened by brush strokes of purple heather and the wide horizon was closed by the blue peaks of a mirage. This place even had a soundtrack—the birds, the sea, the music of the pipes.

The piper segued into "Amazing Grace." Whoever had first thought to play that old hymn as a pipe tune was a genius. The simple tune cut like a knife and Kate mouthed the words, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. ..."

"Thank you," she said, although she knew he couldn't hear her. And yet his eyes crinkled in reply.

She walked back to the hotel with every microscopic hair in her ear canals still waving to the music, even when the music died to a low resonance of wind and sea. A smell of peat smoke hinted at evening, dinner, a comfortable bed. Yes, she needed to go to ground for the night. She retrieved her suitcase from the trunk of her car and went back into the hotel.

Lucy was in the dining room counting out packets of butter. She looked around with a broad grin. "Needing a room, are you?"

"Yes, please," Kate told her.

"No problem. Number 3, end of the hall. Just fetch the key from behind the desk, there, I've soup boiling over in the kitchen." Wiping her hands on her apron, Lucy hurried into the back.

Feeling like a member of the family, Kate found the key and

lugged her suitcase up the narrow, twisting stairs. Number 3 was small and spare. The bed sagged in the middle but its sheets were bleached to dazzling whiteness. A dressing table sat in front of the window, its discolored but polished mirror turning its back on the view. The bathroom was wedged into a corner, so tiny Kate could touch toilet, shower, and sink without moving a step.

She laid out a bar of soap and her toothbrush, making her mark not in shit but in cleaning implements, and took a quick shower. The stall was the size of a coffin. She'd have felt trapped by her body as surely as she felt trapped by her mind if she hadn't been able to look through the door and see that, behind the mirror, the landscape opened out broad and free.

Defiantly she toweled off in front of the window. If a Peeping Tom was outside he was getting the sight he deserved.

Kate sat down in the dining room expecting the food to be either boiled or microwaved, prudent and tasteless. But what Lucy set down on the starched white tablecloth was a tomato soup enlivened by curry, flaky salmon fresh from the sea, baby vegetables ripped untimely from the earth, and whole-grain bread. Dessert was a bowl of strawberries bursting with flavor. Lucy hovered holding a pitcher. "Cream?"

Appetite is shameful, Kate thought. Appetite is evidence of the physical, of the primitive. Taking pleasure in the appetite is the original sin. She should play it safe and stay on her diet. But it was too late. She'd admitted to hunger. "Yes, please," she said, and Lucy poured a stream of thick, rich cream over her strawberries.

Kate ate, feeling deliciously guilty, and licked her lips like a cat licking its whiskers. Were those silk flowers on the table? She touched one silky petal. No, they were real roses, damp and pink as her own flesh.

A speaker in the corner of the room emitted a mumble of muzak, the original melody smoothed into margarine, artificially colored, artificially flavored. What Kate wanted was the throb of the pipes. She wanted music with the power to break her heart and the magic to heal it. She wanted.... Well, never mind what she wanted. A nightcap would have to do.

She threw down her napkin, got up from the table, and walked across the hall to the bar.

Glasses and bottles gleamed on one side of the room. A diminutive but fierce fire gleamed on the other. A young couple in the corner were talking in a language that wasn't Scotspoken English or even Gaelic with its gutturals soft like thistledown. They sat close together, unabashedly groping each other. Honeymooners, no doubt. Enjoy it while you can.

Kate turned toward the bar and stopped dead. The piper stood there, wiping a glass with a dish towel. Now he was dressed in a demure white shirt and a tartan tie that matched his kilt—oh yes, Kate saw with a peek over the bar, he was still wearing the kilt. And the earring, too.

No longer compressed around the mouthpiece, his lips curved like the outline of the islands on the horizon. "Hello there, Kate. What's your pleasure?"

She almost told him. Instead she managed a return smile—no wonder he'd recognized her, when she dropped three pounds into his kitty—Lucy must've told him her name.... It was wanting the truth, not appetite, that was the original sin. "A glass of that Lagavulin, please. The 16-year-old. I guess it's old enough to drive."

Stupid joke, but he kept on smiling as he drew off a shot of the golden liquid and set it before her.

His red hair was smoothed flat now and his eyes were less blue than gray in the electric light. It was the flicker of the firelight that sculpted the planes and angles of his face. He had good bone structure beneath his taut, fair skin, like Skye itself had good bone structure below its soil.

"Thank you."

"No problem." He jotted her name on a notepad, starting a tab.

"Kilcolm Hotel" was printed at the top of the pad. "'Kil' means cell, doesn't it? Like a hermit's cell?"

"Oh aye, some old hermit set up here, ages ago. A saint, they say, saints being a bit thicker on the ground then than they are now. Might even have been Columba himself, running away from Ireland after fighting a war over a manuscript."

Fighting a war over a manuscript. That was a good one. "No wonder saints saw visions. Sensory deprivation."

Kate turned around, intending to sit down at a table. Through the door beside the fireplace she saw the lounge, and through the lounge's windows she saw the sunset. Clear tints of amber, pink, and blood-red scarlet flowed across the sky. Each of the islands was edged with gold. They were Tir nan Og, the Celtic Otherworld. Not Hades, the Underworld, but the Otherworld.

She sipped the whisky. Its first fiery rush polished the cream from her tongue, leaving it tingling. Her mouth and nose filled with peat smoke and sea spray, earth and heaven fused. Her stomach glowed.

"No," said the voice behind her. "Sensory overload."

She looked back around, and for one quick moment felt her fingers playing in his hair and along the edge of his kilt. Hoping he'd think the red in her face was from the wind and the sun, she dropped her eyes to the nameplate on his breast pocket. "Alexander."

"Oh aye. Not so great, though." He started wiping another glass.

I wouldn't be so sure of that. Kate pulled up a stool and sat down. One drink and she was already dizzy. Sensory overload....

And what was here for a young man? Her kids always hung out in shopping malls, but there wasn't a mall for miles. This place looked back, not forward. It was a place of long, harsh memories. It was the place where middle-aged women came to lick their wounds.

"Are you having a good holiday?" Alexander asked.

It's not a holiday. She said, "Yes, thank you."

BUT SHAMEFUL AS THE FLESH WAS, IT WASN'T AS SHAMEFUL AS RAW EMOTION.

"Dunshian's a fine old castle. Good job it's at the end of the road, no one's robbed the stone. But then, when it was built there were no roads, only the sea. It was the guardian of the straits, then."

"Not just a tourist attraction?"

The blue-gray eyes targeted her again. "The guide this afternoon, he was laying on all the old stories for those tourists, wasn't he? The true stories, not the prettied-up ones."

"I'm sure he was also feeding them the romantic guff about Flora

MacDonald and Bonnie Prince Charlie and Over the Sea to Skye."

"Flora's grave is just down the road. That's real enough. What's the harm of a bit of romance, of tales that've become more real than the reality, when there's a grave at the end of the road?"

Kate had no answer for that. She drank again. The flavor flared in her mouth like the sunset blazed across the sky. "Even Flora and Charlie's reality—they met, they took a boat ride, they parted—even that's more palatable than those grim stories from the castle. The same stories you get in Greek mythology, Medea murdering her sons by Jason, or Tantalus never able to drink from the pool he stands in, or even Prometheus, chained to a rock with birds tearing at his guts because he stole the fire from the gods...." She wasn't sure where that bit about Prometheus had come from.

The dish towel squeaked faintly on the glass. "Such stories are our myths of origin. Our Dreamtime. Stories, music—and songs, the words and the music together—they feed the soul the way food feeds the body. Greek, Norse, Celt, your stories need taking seriously."

Either that made perfect sense or she was finding truth in the bottom of a glass. Kate poured the last of the whisky down her throat and sighed. "I figured you modern Scots were trying to outrun your past and only got dragged back into it because of the tourists. Packaged heritage. Shrink-wrapped wishful thinking. Passion served up with an order of fries."

"Packaged passion rehydrated by the listener's own body fluids." He smiled again. A Mona Lisa smile, mysterious and distant. "Thank you for contributing to the band."

"You play in a band?"

"Oh aye. A few of the lads, guitar, drums, my pipes. One of the few instruments that'll hold its own with an electric guitar."

"Rock music? Really?"

"Folk-rock. Rock 'n' reel. Forward into Scotland's past."

"Where do you play?"

"Here and there. Mind you, we don't make more than a few bob."

"You could move to Edinburgh or even London, get a larger audience."

"But that takes a few bob as well."

So here was yet another youth with ambition but no money. And Kate was middle-aged with money but no ambition.... No. That was a lie. Her ambition was choked, pent up, impacted, just as her soul was plugged by emotion. By poetry and music and stories left dried and stored. She was tongue-tied and ashamed—of what? Of having stories to tell? Or of being afraid to tell them?

Yes, she wanted to tell him, follow your dream. But she was hardly setting a good example. Maybe she could be a cautionary tale.

Alexander was drawing off another whisky. Whisky, *usquebaugh*, the water of life. She hadn't asked for another one. She must look thirsty.

He set the glass down before her and this time didn't add it to her tab. "We've named the band 'Keridwen' after the mother goddess with her cauldron of inspiration. One of the old pagan spirits that never went away in spite of the iron swords and the iron fists that tried to stamp them out."

"That tried to stamp out the music. That burned the pipes and the fiddles and turned the dancers to stone." Kate sipped. She'd half expected her tongue to be numb, but no, it was extraordinarily sensitive, so that each word came out burnished brightly. "I thought Keridwen was the crone, or at least the mother, not a young woman like a muse."

"A wee lass playing a harp is no muse for this country. You need a strong, experienced woman, a proper muse for the creative heavy lifting, eh?"

"An experienced woman. You think?" The whiskey leaped in her mouth, in her stomach, like the fire on the hearth. "Oh for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention!" But Shakespeare had lived in smooth, green, lush England, not Caledonia, stern and wild.

She could feel Alexander watching her like she could feel the warmth of the fire or the cold wind off the sea. The oleaginous muzak was doubly annoying now, when what she wanted to hear was the skirl of his pipes. "Where did you study music?" she asked.

"I learnt to play from my grandfather. My parents weren't so keen on the old songs and the old tales, wanted something fashionable. I suppose the tourists are like me, in a way, after digging out their roots. What once was lost but now is found."

Odd, somewhere in the recesses of Kate's auditory canal she really could hear the pipes, slowly building behind the muzak.

"You should've heard me practicing, for years I was scaring the jackdaws from their nests. The neighbors went about with their eyes all screwed up, painful-like. It's hard to hide your mistakes when you're playing the great highland pipes." With a small chime Alexander put the glass back into its rack and chose another. His long, strong fingers traced its rim round and round, then plunged inside. Kate could see her own distorted reflection in the bowl.

"You're a writer, then?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, even though she'd denied it earlier today, like Peter denying Christ. "Well, I took a couple of writing courses. One instructor had us writing for the local newspaper, small and safe. The other gave us formulas for stories. I sent out a few, but never sold any. The classes were all just theory, not practice. ..." She almost said, like sex, where practice rarely meets the imagination. "Then I tried journaling. But why write about my life when what I want is to get beyond my life? I keep hearing David Balfour whispering behind my back. ..."

"David Balfour from *Kidnapped*?" Alexander asked.

"From the sequel, actually. When long, long after Culloden, after the Jacobite cause had crashed and burned and Charlie was back in France, Alan Breck says he'll go on fighting. And Balfour tells him not to bother, no one wants him to go on, it's all over."

"Ah well, David Balfour was always a bit of a prick, I'm thinking."

Kate surprised herself with a laugh.

"Oh aye, Alan should've given up the war. That's history for you, dead cold. But you're making your own history, aren't you? You're telling stories. Tales that're more real than the reality."

Kate couldn't believe she was talking so openly and honestly. It was like toweling off in front of the window. But shameful as the flesh was, it wasn't as shameful as raw emotion.... The whisky had loosened her tongue. She should've known better, letting herself get drunk, not just on alcohol but on Alexander's voice, like the whisky mellow and tart, acid and smooth.

She stroked the smooth glass and the polished wood of the bar. No, her fingertips weren't numb either. And she really could hear the pipes, ranting to a rock beat, backed by the high, pure soprano of a penny whistle and the alto keening of a fiddle, not quite on key, not quite off, and a snare drum like her own heartbeat beneath the music. The notes looped round and round and came out where they went in, Celtic interlace in sound. She wanted to leap up and pump her fist in the air. Or pick up a sword and kill an Englishman. Or vault over the bar and embrace Alexander.

She looked up. He was still watching her, his eyes the silvered indigo of the sea. Humoring a paying customer, no doubt—got a live one here, help pay for the band. But while there was humor in his expression it was wry rather than mocking. Slight creases at the corners of his mouth made her wonder suddenly if he was as young as she'd thought.

The couple walked across the floor entwined. Kate hoped they could make it upstairs. She didn't want to find them going at it on the staircase. It was hard to remember what it was like to be that turned on. Even though something was melting down through her gut right now, something more than alcohol, more than music. She laughed again.

Alexander looked from the couple back to her with a knowing grin. Kate didn't blush. Her face was already hot with whisky. The

lad, the young man, the piper—he was reading her mind. She'd had too much to drink, too much to think. "Good night," she said, and discovered to her surprise she could still stand up.

"Good night," said Alexander.

She walked a more or less straight path from the room, met the muzak, bland and unthreatening, in the hall, and left it behind as she climbed the staircase.

Outside her window the sun was a rosy gleam in the southwest and the sky was Prussian blue, clear and deep. Kate hoped to see a ghostly army marching across the parking lot, a parade of disembodied souls, figments of memory. But she saw nothing but sheep grazing on the hillside below the black crest of the castle. Out of a harsh land, strength. Out of a long memory, beauty.... Was it Plato who'd said memory was the mother of the muses?

Yes, she liked it here, this land where past and present interlaced, where the rueful acceptance of necessity didn't dull the imagination but whetted it. Even if she was seeing the world not through rose-colored glasses but whisky-colored ones. "Thanks, Alexander."

Kate turned out the bedside lamp and watched the long, slow twilight fade into darkness. The sheets warmed to her body and emitted the faint aroma of sea air. She was just teetering unbalanced on the precipice of sleep, a moment away from that long glide into nothingness, when she heard the pipes again, remote but insistent.

The music drew her out and down. Rocks split the foaming surf below her, teeth around a gaping mouth. *What the....* She hit, hard, the breath knocked out of her, and the waves rolled her over and pulled her down. But instead of the hollow ring of deep water she heard music swelling around her, music that danced and marched and cried all at once.

You have to pay the piper. Not the Highland pipes but the Pan-pipes—the great god Pan, no greeting card cherub but the ancient spirit of madness and terror—panic at the wilderness of sea and stone and wind-tortured hillsides—an old pagan spirit that never went away, that grew and changed and survived. And summoned Kate into the wilderness.

She lay on her bed, on the beach, the shit-splattered walls of the castle leaning disapprovingly over her while inside old MacDonald feasted on his own future—what liquid would ever wash that taste from his mouth, not whisky, not water, not blood itself....

Help me, release me, let me out, let me go, said the resonant voice in Kate's ear.

Express appetite, she heard herself reply, and you turn to stone, to stand for all eternity as a warning to others.

Appetite isn't easy, only natural.

The stones stood up from the earth, stones, rocks—music that rocks, that reaches right down into your gut and twists—music that reverberates in the marrow of the bones where fear hides. Not the fear of mortality, because fear is mortality. The fear of making mistakes, of going too far, of revealing yourself, of stepping over the edge of the earth—or out of the banqueting hall window—and falling into ice-cold blood-warm currents of the body, blood, sweat, tears, semen, milk, whisky.

Kate was thirsty. She opened her mouth to drink. To speak. And he was there, his kisses insistent as his music, music that would wake the dead and set them to dancing. *Help me release me let me out let me go.*

She wasn't sure who she was or where she was. What she knew—what she recognized as if out of deep memory—was his smoke and salt scent in her nostrils and the tart-sweet taste of his tongue in her mouth. His eyes were a tender green, like the sea at the base of the cliff where the rock plunged smoothly into the water and filled it. His body in her arms was too too solid flesh, hot, hard, smooth, real as the imagination is real.

Kate heard her own voice catch in a gasp of both terror and delight. Keridwen and her cauldron, there was anatomical symbolism for you, the feminine cauldron of creativity, of inspiration, the cauldron that needed to be properly stirred.

And she gave tongue to her delight and her terror, kissing his eager mouth and devouring his in return, just as she devoured his music and spoke her truth to his body. No more hiding, no more shame. Eat, and speak out.

AND SHE GAVE TONGUE TO HER DELIGHT AND HER TERROR, KISSING HIS EAGER MOUTH AND DEVOURING HIS IN RETURN.

Help me release me let me out let me go.

Let him out? But she was letting him in.... She let go and slid down a waterfall, sparkling, fragile as glass, strong as rock. And then the music was gone. Silence deep as the sea echoed in her head. The dungeon walls closed around her. She stood over his body, a woman warrior, and raised her sword. "Let me out, I'll confess it all, every word of it, let me out!"

The sword was his body. With it she cut, she slashed, she stabbed. The stones of the wall fell before her. They weren't bleeding, it was her own hands bleeding where she clutched the sword. *Let me out let me out....*

Her eyes opened. Was that steam in the cool room? No, a bright light was shining in her eyes. Slowly Kate sat up, her heart hammering, the sweat pooling between her breasts and thighs.

No, it wasn't that bright a light at all. The creamy circle of the moon hung in the window behind her mirror, through her looking glass. The curtains moved gently in a draft like a sigh of satisfaction. But Kate knew she'd never be satisfied. She'd always want more.

"Where are you?" she whispered to the room.

All she could hear was the thrum of the wind and the waves.

"Who are you?"

But dreams don't wear nameplates.

Suddenly she heard, small and distinct, the sound of her door shutting. Kate stumbled from the bed and across the room. The door was locked, the bolt thrown, just as she'd left it.

The cold draft teased her naked body and goosebumps rose on her skin. She couldn't remember taking off her pajamas. Throwing herself back into the bed, she yanked the covers up to her chin. They were damp, scented with whisky as though she'd exuded it like

sweat. No, she hadn't seen anything, but she'd felt everything.

She expected to lie there awake the rest of the night, watching the moon cross the window. But when she woke up the next morning she realized she'd fallen into a profound dreamless sleep.

She stared at her crumpled face in the mirror and told herself she'd been asleep all along. She'd had a dream so vivid it was a hallucination. Or a vision. Sensory overload or alcoholic fantasy, or Alexander playing his pipes downstairs, it didn't matter.

Alexander. *Wow, I didn't know I had it in me....* She laughed. No need to be embarrassed about a dream. What was safer than a dream?

This dream strained against the borders of her mind. She was pregnant with it. If you were pregnant, you couldn't act as though you'd never had sex.

In the dining room the young couple were feeding each other small bites of toast. Kate smiled at them. They didn't know, did they? They were too young for the creative heavy lifting.

Hungrily she ate everything Lucy set before her, rich, fat food: eggs, bacon, sausage, toast with butter and a sweet-tart smear of marmalade. "I heard Alexander playing his pipes after he got off work last night," Kate commented. "Have you ever heard Keridwen play?"

Lucy stopped dead with the teapot in mid-air. "Eh?"

"Or was that a demo tape he was playing last night? You had to have heard it, the great highland pipes aren't shy."

"It was quiet as the grave here last night—I'm sorry, don't believe I ever caught your name."

"Kate," Kate said automatically, and set down her fork. Her stomach tightened, embracing the food.

"No one named Alexander works here. You're not thinking of Angus, are you? My husband, he minds the bar in the evenings." Lucy gestured toward a dark, heavy-set man who was just emerging from the back hall carrying a mop and bucket.

"Good morning," he said politely as he passed. "Hope you slept well. A dram of Lagavulin makes a right fine nightcap, and no mistake."

Kate opened her mouth and shut it again. What was she going to ask—was I talking to you last night or was I sitting nursing a whisky and staring into the fire? She glanced over at the honeymooners. They wouldn't have noticed a brass band in the room.... They wouldn't have noticed a rock band, either, even if its lead musician was a piper.

Rock. There was a double meaning for you, either stone and immutability or music shaking the listener to her roots. "Is there a piper who plays at the castle ruins?" she asked.

"No," Lucy said. "There's a fine old ballad about one, though. A piper from Dunshian was called to play for the Queen of Faerie, thought he'd stayed there for just one night but when he left found he'd been there two hundred year or more."

"Of course. Dunshian. Dun means 'fort,' right? And 'Shian' means 'Sidhe.' The Sidhe. The fairies."

"That's the story, right enough. More tea?"

"Ah, no, no, thank you." Kate felt as unbalanced as she had when listening to Alexander play yesterday. If she pinched herself would she wake up? She hoped not.

Your stories need taking seriously. But that was one story Alexander hadn't mentioned. The Sidhe, not Disney pixies but the ancient and powerful fair folk. Elementals. Figures from the Dreamtime, summoned by human desire.

No, Lucy and Angus weren't playing an elaborate joke on a tourist. The dream had really happened—and the word "real" would never again have the same definition. You had to believe in something beyond reality or there was no point to story-telling, was there?

Kate got up from the table and walked outside, following the sound of the waves, the wind, the sea birds, and the elusive music of the pipes. The music that called to battle and lamented the fallen all at once.

The pied piper—no, the pied piper led children away. This piper was leading her onward. But this time the music didn't grow louder and louder as she approached the castle, and no piper guarded the gate.

The archaeologists worked at the blocked archway, carefully pulling the stones away. The taps of their hammers sounded like snare drums. She stood with her hands jammed in her pockets, watching and waiting.

Behind the door was a dark cavity. One of the men trained a flashlight into it. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed.

The other man stepped forward. So did Kate. For just a moment she caught the stench from the open door, every stink mortality could yield. Then a gust of wind scoured away the reek of decay and sea spray coated her glasses so that her eyes blurred.

But she could see what the men were seeing, illuminated by the gleam of the flashlight. A human skeleton lay on the rich loam like a sleeper lying on a bedspread. Matted fabric lay across the leg bones and a bundle of sticks and more fabric lay inside the curve of his left arm. Next to his skull, next to his eye sockets staring blindly upward, a gold earring glinted like a wedding band.

"How long has this doorway been blocked up?" asked one man.

Another answered, "Two, three hundred years maybe."

"Suppose he's been there since 1745? After Culloden the English passed laws banning the pipes, said they were instruments of war."

"They banned the kilt, too, wanted to erase our identity."

"Was this one a rebel then, are you thinking?" The men exchanged shrugs.

Kate stepped back and turned away, but not before she caught a quick whiff of something as aromatic as whisky. The odor of sanctity, probably, said to cling to a saint's bones. Where did saints come from but the Dreamtime? There were saints who stayed detached in the face of madness and murder and there were saints who passionately desired to ease the wounded souls of man—of woman—kind.... Alexander was no more a saint than she was.

Kate pulled a tissue out of her pocket, wiped her glasses, and put them back on. There, she could see. See that the young man, no matter what his name had been, had just as likely been walled up alive because he wasn't a rebel. Because he didn't make plots. Because he never confessed but kept quiet and safe. If he'd spoken out no cell could've held him.

Kate's heart swelled, filled every cell of her body, strained to burst. *Help me release me let me go let me out....* "Yes," she said.

Without looking again at the fragile bones she walked down from the castle and away from the threshold where this world met—no, not the next, for Faerie, the Otherworld, was this world too, created and nurtured by poets and musicians.

Inside the hotel she could hear Lucy singing the ballad about the human piper who stayed too long in Faerie. But what about the corresponding ballad, the story of the fairy piper who stayed too long in this world?

Kate walked into the lounge and sat down. She opened her notebook to its virgin first page. She took out her pencil. It was time to leap from the window, not into the eternity of death but into the eternity of the story.

The pencil was a chanter. It was a magic wand. It was a taut male body in her hand. Faintly at the edge of awareness Kate heard the pipes playing. "Thank you," she said, and she touched her pencil to the page.

She'd always threatened to run away, and now she'd done it. She ran until she reached the end of the Earth. And then she stepped off its edge and flew. ❧

Even when you know what's going on, magic (and love) can be hard to believe in.

The Sea-Maid

There is a sculpture by Rodin called "The Little Mermaid." It depicts a young girl looking out over a sea to which she can never return, and every line of her body is filled with such incredible longing that your heart twists to see it. In the original tale by Hans Christian Andersen, called "The Sea-Maid," her story ends in a different kind of tragedy: on the dawn of the day after her beloved marries another, the first rays of sunlight claim her life, changing her into sea foam. But whether it is the loss of everything she has known and loved, or the loss of her very life that touches you most deeply, I tell you that neither of those is the real tragedy of the little mermaid. The real tragedy is that the man she loved was a jerk. I should know. I'm the jerk.

BY CATHERINE WELLS ILLUSTRATION BY WEB BRYANT

I was 28 years old in the summer of 1976, and inland there was a lot of hoopla going on about the Bicentennial; but I was holed up on my island, listening to Chicago and BS&T, which you might think is hard to do with your head up your ass, but it's amazingly easy. Beats the hell out of dealing with reality, anyway, and the reality was that I had been dumped, big time. Not that I'd never been dumped before; it's a common affliction for jerks and morons of my caliber. But Diane was different. Diane knew exactly what I was and she loved me anyway, and that's not easy to find. I was smart enough to know I shouldn't let this one get away, so I tried to marry her.

It was supposed to happen at the end of the school year—she and I were both teaching at a school for the deaf. Yeah, yeah, don't pin any medals on me; you gotta do something with your life. I took American Sign Language because I didn't want to learn French, and I got kinda hooked on it. It's like a secret code, you know? So what else do you do with sign language, except teach deaf kids? Anyway, I met Diane my first year teaching, only she taught because she loved it. I kept teaching because I loved her.

It always bothered her that my family was rich. I told her my grandfather was a working stiff—a fisherman—and that he insisted the rest of us should practice a useful profession, too. Diane bought it, and we were going to get married that summer. But instead she dumped me. It's one thing to love a jerk, and another to agree to spend your whole life with him. I can't blame her for being scared; but when she cleared out of the apartment and left a note that just said, "I'm sorry, I can't do this," I felt as if someone had ripped my intestines out through my throat.

So that's why I went to ground in my mom's house, lying in the dark in my old bedroom and listening to "Wishing You Were Here" on the stereo, over and over and over.

I'm not sure how Jenna got me out on her boat. Oh, yes, I am—it was my mother. She's the kind of lady who will put up with just so much self-pity, and then she kicks your butt to go out and face the big bad world again. Mom had dragged me to the mainland for something, and at the marina we ran into Jenna, who had her daddy's 50-foot power boat moored a couple of slips over from our launch. Jenna and I have been friends since forever; I remember taking my rowboat from our island to her family's house on the point when I was maybe seven. Our grandfathers were sometimes-partners in the rum-running industry during Prohibition, and our fathers went to Harvard together—you get the drift. Anyway, she was celebrating her liberation from Husband Number Two and engagement to Husband Number Three, so she was having a little party aboard the boat and insisted that I come. Mom said it would be good for me; Mom didn't have a clue how much cocaine was likely to be aboard.

At any rate, I did as I was told and joined the party cruise out into Long Island Sound, but I really wasn't in the mood. You know I was in bad shape when there were booze and drugs to spare, and girls in bikinis running around topless, and I wasn't in the mood. But watching Jenna immolate herself with narcotics and hang all over some gold-digger has never been one of my favorite things. I know Jenna; I know that under the party-girl, Cosmo exterior is a frightened little girl who wants desperately to be loved. Maybe I should have stepped in years ago, when she started making bad choices; but I always figured what Jenna did was Jenna's business; and I watched her become the kind of hollow, desperate creature that guys screw every chance they get and laugh at behind her back.

Like I said, I'm a jerk.

Maybe I was just starting to realize it that night. God knows Diane told me often enough, which is partly why I loved her—she never took any crap from me. But I didn't see myself as a jerk; I saw myself as a really clever guy who could shit on people and get away with it, most of the time. I mean, I knew it wasn't right to shit on people, but if you can get away with it, there isn't a whole lot of incentive to stop. That night, though, I looked at some of the people on that boat, and I knew that for Jenna to call them friends was obscene. These people didn't care about Jenna. Half the time they didn't really care about themselves; they just kept looking around for the next diversion so they wouldn't have to think about their lives. And I finally realized, *That's me. I'm one of them. I'm a jerk, and a damned hollow one at that.*

Moments of self-revelation are tough on your ego. I gave serious consideration to snorting enough coke that I wouldn't have to look in that mirror ever again. But there's something inside me that just won't surrender to defeat, so I settled for leaving the revelers on deck and escaping to the bridge where, presumably, there was someone sane and sober minding the ship.

There wasn't. We had anchored a mile or so east of the island—I could see the light at the end of our pier—and then whoever was captaining had joined the party. So the radio was crackling away with a squall warning, and no one heard it till I got there.

It was my own fault as much as anyone else's, although I didn't think so at the time. Raised with a weather eye like I was; shifts in wind and air pressure usually set off alarm bells in my head almost before the Coast Guard issues its warnings. But I was so wrapped up in my own misery—and, yeah, a healthy amount of Jack Daniels—that I didn't notice till I heard the radio.

I broke up the party in a hurry then, bellowing like a bull for people to put on life jackets and secure anything they didn't want to lose, and shoving Jenna's fiancé toward the bridge with instructions to get this boat started back to port. It's a good-sized boat, and it would have ridden out a small storm easily, but this didn't sound like a small one; and besides, I was pissed. Pissed at Jenna and her friends, pissed at myself, pissed at life in general—and I wanted to be belligerent and macho and save the day by getting the boat back to port before the squall hit. Fearless Paul Fitzhugh, man of the hour. Like I said, a jerk.

The wind was gusting pretty good by this time, so most of the partiers were already below. Jenna called me an arrogant bastard and stomped off to join her boyfriend at the bridge, leaving just three or four nautical souls on deck with me, looking around to see what needed doing. Near the stern I saw a line trailing in the water, tied to a net full of beer bottles being kept cold in traditional fashion; and if I'd been sober, I'd have just left it there. It wouldn't have been that much drag. But I told you the state I was in, so I reached over the gunwale to haul the damned thing back onto the deck. Just at that moment, the pilot slammed the boat into gear and it lurched forward, sending me tumbling over the side and into the Sound.

Did I mention that in my self-righteous castigation of the other partiers, I had neglected to put on a life jacket myself?

I must have hit my head when I fell, because the next thing I remember I was on my back and there was an arm around my chest, hauling me through some very rough seas. It took a minute for me to figure out what was happening, besides the fact I was gasping for air and getting mostly seawater; but then I was able to kick my legs and help keep my own 190 pounds afloat. My savior—there's no doubt in my mind that I'd have drowned if she hadn't been there—relaxed her grip when she saw that I was conscious, and I flipped reflexively from my back to my stomach and started to swim.

In the darkness, with the sea surging and the rain slashing down, I could hardly see her face. But she swam alongside me, not seeming to struggle anywhere near as much as I was struggling, although she was

In the darkness, with the sea surging and the

smaller and looked very young. We didn't try to talk, just kept swimming toward the lights on the island. They looked about a quarter of a mile distant, and I wondered if I could make it in the heavy seas. Then I remembered where the yacht had been anchored and realized this girl must have carried me three-quarters of a mile before I came to; and I knew if she could do that, then I could make the island.

If we'd come up on the eastern shore, we'd have been pounded against the rocks there. We had to go around to the sheltered northern side. In the last 50 feet I started to fade, and I felt the girl's arms under my chest, keeping me afloat, moving me forward. Dazed by fatigue now more than alcohol, I knew it wasn't possible. How could she keep herself afloat in these seas, when her arms supported me? Then the rest of her brushed up against me, and it didn't feel like skin, or a wet suit, or any kind of fabric I could think of. Crazy things pop into your head when you're at the end of your physical strength, and I stopped swimming for a heartbeat, trying to peer through the murky, storm-whipped water to see her legs. Please, God, show me legs, because I can't believe …

But you can't see more than eight or ten inches deep in the Sound, even when it's bright and calm. I couldn't see anything, so I told myself not to be a lunatic and started swimming again.

Finally the pier loomed up in the darkness just in front of me. The waves were breaking over the wooden planks, so it was simple enough to grab onto a mooring cleat and haul myself up to relative safety. The girl pushed at my legs, helping, and as soon as I was sure I wasn't going to wash over the other side, I reached back to help her out of the water, too.

But she wasn't there.

It couldn't have been more than 15 seconds between when I last felt her touch and when I turned back for her, but in that time she had vanished beneath the surface. Once, in junior high, I saw a kid go that way: He was goofing around on a plastic raft and got out too far, so he slid off the raft and tried to swim back to shore. One second he was there, thrashing feebly in the chop, and the next second he was gone. His mom started to scream, and I swam out to help, but he was just gone. Silent, sudden, and absolute.

> rain slashing down, I could hardly see her face.

This girl was gone just like that, and I knew that she had traded her life for mine.

I'd like to tell you I spent a wretched night wracked by guilt, but the truth is, after I staggered up to the house and blurted out the story to Mom, I crawled into my bed and slept like the dead until almost noon the next day. When I woke up, it took a while to convince myself I hadn't dreamed it all: the party, the storm, the girl. But even if the knot on my skull and the ache in my muscles hadn't told me the truth, Jenna called about then, hysterical because they hadn't noticed I was missing until they were halfway back to port. They had gone back out to look for me, she said, and I told her that was stupid. Beyond that she wasn't very coherent, except to be obviously relieved that I was alive, even if I was still a jerk.

Having dragged myself out of bed to take her call, I pulled on some clothes and trudged down to the beach to see if maybe, somehow, that girl had climbed out of the water on another part of the island. I walked the whole mile and three-eighths of shoreline with our dogs for company, and I saw a lot of junk washed up on the rocks and the sand; but neither my eyes nor the dogs' noses found what I was looking for. I hadn't expected to, but hope is a funny thing.

During that long walk, I had further time to think about the irony of it. It's one thing if a kid with her whole life ahead of her dies trying to save her little brother, or her best friend, or someone like Mother Theresa. But to give your life for someone you don't even know—How did she know I wasn't a drug runner, or a murderer, or a child molester? The only answer was, it didn't matter to her. She saw someone in trouble, and she did what she could—no, she did more than that. When I saw that kid drown back in junior high, I did what I could: I swam to the spot and dove down toward the bottom looking for him. I made three or four dives and gave up.

And even if I'd found him, I wouldn't have traded places with him. If I'd been trying to haul him ashore and felt my own life was in jeopardy, I'd have let him go and saved myself.

That made me think of Diane again. Maybe that was how she felt. She saw me drowning in my own arrogance and tried to pull me out, but when it looked as if I might drag her in with me, she got scared and let go. *Christ, Diane, don't let go. I see how it is now, and I know I can make it. Only don't let go …*

But this girl who rescued me, she never asked what kind of person I was. She never asked what it was going to cost her to save my life. And she never let go.

That night I called Diane's mother, trying to find out where Diane was, and if she'd talk to me. Her mom wouldn't tell me anything, of course. I begged her to give Diane a message, to tell her that I needed to talk to her, really needed to talk to her. I didn't want to say I'd had a life-changing experience—it sounded too dumb, and I figured her mother would never believe me, anyway. So I just tried to sound humble and desperate, and hoped the woman had even a spark of the charity shown me by the girl in the Sound.

I didn't hear from Diane. But three days later, that girl washed up on our beach. Alive.

The dogs woke us, barking down by the pier. We've never needed much security beyond the dogs; yeah, it's a big house and screams Rich Family Lives Here, but we're not famous or anything. Grandpa Fitzhugh was known for his hospitality, and he didn't want to intimidate his old fishing cronies by putting a fence around the place. We've just kept on that way. The dogs always let us know when someone is coming.

That morning they wouldn't quit barking, so I threw on some clothes and went out to investigate. When I stepped onto the porch and saw the body stretched on the sand, I broke into a run.

She was face down, naked and unconscious. I checked her pulse and found it slow and steady, so I turned her gently onto her back. She looked about 15, her long blonde hair tangled and caked with sand. Her skin was pale and cold, but she didn't appear to be injured. When I moved her, her eyes fluttered, so I lifted her into a sitting position and was relieved to see the color come back into her cheeks. She blinked again, then looked up into my face and smiled weakly. There was no doubt in my mind it was the same girl who'd saved me from drowning.

"Are you all right?" I asked anxiously.

It was as though she had to think about that for a minute. Looking down at her legs, she reached out a hand and touched first one, then the other. Then she looked back at me, a little dazed, and nodded.

Mom came out of the house. "Paul?" she called. "What is it?"

"It's her!" I called back, ecstatic. "She's alive!"

I helped her to her feet then, but she swayed unsteadily, so I just scooped her up and carried her to the house.

My mother is very practical; when she saw the condition the girl was in, the first thing she did was open a closet and grab the nearest article of clothing, a coat. Then she followed me into the kitchen. The girl didn't seem to be embarrassed at all about being naked; that is, she didn't reach for the coat. Maybe she was still too dazed. Maybe.

I set her on her feet in the kitchen, supporting her while Mom got the coat around her; then I pulled up a chair for her to sit in. She didn't have any trouble staying upright in the chair, but she stared all around her at the kitchen as if she'd never seen copper kettles and wooden spoons before. And she kept reaching down to touch her legs, rubbing her thighs and wriggling her toes. It was a little spooky.

Mom asked her again if she was all right, and the girl looked at Mom with a vulnerable, scared kind of look. I jumped to a natural conclusion—natural, that is, if you happen to teach deaf kids. Squatting down in front of her, I began to sign as I spoke. "Are you deaf?" I asked.

She looked surprised by the question and shook her head. Then she pointed to her throat and gave a helpless shrug. "You can hear, but you can't speak?" I asked, still signing reflexively, and she nodded.

That seemed pretty odd to me, but I thought maybe it was psychosomatic. Anyway, now that we knew she could hear and understand us, we tried to find out what had happened to her, and how she had washed up on our island.

It was a lost cause. Not only could she not speak, but she seemed to be illiterate as well. Autistic, maybe, or some major-league psychological problems—that's what I told myself. I didn't want to think about the body that brushed up against me in the water, and the touch that wasn't skin or cloth …

We had Doc Elliot come out and look at her. He's an old family friend, and he used to come out to the island to check on Dad, before Dad had to go into hospice care. Doc Elliot couldn't find any physical maladies, nor could he explain why the girl couldn't stand up on her own. "Leg muscles are plenty strong," he told me. "Like she's a dancer or a skater or something. No ear infection to upset her equilibrium. I'll have to run some tests to know if there's any neurological reason for her condition."

He mentioned the possibility of psychological trauma, too, because the girl didn't seem interested in giving us any information about herself or where she had come from or what her life had been like before she washed up on the beach. Amnesia, Doc concluded; then he reminded us that the most expedient thing to do was contact the police to see if she'd been reported missing.

I promised Doc I would do that, as I walked him out to his boat. When I came back into the house and went to look in on our guest, she was lying on her back on the bed, lifting her legs into the air one at a time, flexing them, and watching in what I can only call amazement.

Nuts, right? That's what I kept telling myself. But when I took a picture of her to the police, they didn't have any missing persons reports that matched. A cop came out to the island and got her fingerprints and asked her some questions, but she continued to be less than helpful, and they still didn't find anything.

I started calling her Zoe, because I couldn't keep saying "that girl who saved my life"; and because Zoe means life, and life came from the sea like Zoe had. I'm not usually a poet, but it felt right to me, and she seemed pleased with it. Delighted, in fact. I started teaching her sign language, so she could communicate, and she was delighted with that, too.

In fact, she was delighted with just about everything. We got Grandma's old walker out of the attic and Zoe used that to get around. She explored the whole house and most of the grounds; and as she did, her coordination and balance improved rapidly. Within a week she hardly needed the walker anymore. The first time she fell, I rushed to pick her up; and when I put my arms around her, she smiled up into my face. "Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" I demanded. But she opened her mouth and her body shook as though she were laughing, except no sound came out. It was eerie.

It spooked me, and I snapped at her. "Be more careful!" Then I stomped off to the other room, because I couldn't help thinking about the little mermaid story, and how the mermaid traded her voice for legs, and it made me mad. It's a fairy tale, for Christ sake! Hans Christian Andersen made it up!

A few minutes later Mom found me outside, slamming tennis balls across the court to vent some of my anger at myself. "Paul? What happened with Zoe?" she asked. "She's in her room crying."

Jesus. The jerk does it again. She saves my life, and I yell at her because her laughter gives me the creeps.

Believe it or not, I went inside and apologized. I told her I was only angry at myself, not her. I told her it scared me when she fell, and sometimes big dumb jerks like me do that, we get angry when what we really are is scared. She bought it. At least, she stopped crying. Good thing, too. If it was scary to see her laugh with no sound, it was even worse to see her silent weeping.

Once she started walking on her own, so that I was sure she would not lose her balance unexpectedly, I took her out in my sailboat. Did she love that! At first she just sat in the bow with the wind blowing her hair and the spray hitting her face, grinning from ear to ear. But then she wanted to know how to sail it. I explained about the tiller and the sail and the lines, and she ate it up. In three or four weeks, she was handling it like a pro.

Her sisters brought her an enchanted

We spent most of the summer together, me teaching her more and more sign language, she pestering me with questions about the house, the island, sailing—and myself. It was sweet, how she got so sad when I told her my father had died of cancer three years before, although I had a devil of a time explaining what cancer was. Yeah, that's right—she had never heard of cancer.

I was surprised, though, that she got so pensive when I said I was an only child, with no brothers or sisters. I tried to make a joke of it, telling her I was so much trouble that my parents decided they didn't want any more; but she didn't laugh. When I asked if she had any brothers or sisters, she said yes, sisters. But then she wouldn't say any more about it.

That night I saw her sitting out on the end of the pier, looking across the Sound. She was there for hours.

Everything I did, Zoe wanted to come along. That was only natural; I was the only one who could really understand her when she signed, although my mom was picking up some signing, too. And I represented security to her, someone who would look out for her and explain things to her, because I knew a lot of things we take for granted were foreign to her. But it was obvious she had a crush on me. I knew that. I didn't think much about it, except that it was kind of flattering. OK, coming off a major wound from Diane, I liked it. It made me feel good. It made me feel worthwhile, and not such a jerk.

Then one day I was digging through my dresser drawer while she watched, looking for an old cap that said "First Mate," which I'd promised to give her. I was throwing stuff on the bed, and a picture of Diane and me tumbled into view. Always curious, Zoe picked it up and looked at it. "Who is that?" she signed.

It still stung like hell to think about. I tried to dismiss it, but somehow it came out, "Oh, that's Diane. She's only the most wonderful woman in the world, and she was going to marry me, but she changed her mind." Then I choked up and couldn't say anything else, so I kept digging in the drawer for a few minutes, even though I had

already found the hat. Finally I swallowed back the lump in my throat enough to say, "Oh, here it is." Pulling the hat out, I turned to toss it to Zoe.

But she wasn't there.

I knew at the time I should have talked to her about Diane, but I didn't want to. I was still bleeding, and I had no intention of sharing my pain with Zoe. Instead I played the clown for her, making jokes, doing corny stuff to make her laugh—anything at all to keep her happy, to keep her distracted. I took her to an amusement park. I entered us as a team in a sailboat race at the yacht club. I sat out on the porch swing with her, telling stories about my salty old grandfather.

Then one day while we were on the mainland, we came back from our shopping excursion—picking up some sealer for the boathouse—to find Diane waiting at the marina.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw her, and I damned near dropped the two buckets of sealer I was carrying.

"Hey, Fitz," she said. "Got a minute?"

A minute? I had a lifetime, and I didn't even think about the little girl trailing behind me. All I knew was that Diane was back, and somehow, I had another shot.

What did I do? I don't even remember. The cans of sealer, Zoe—I don't remember a thing about them. I just remember Diane, and that we walked back up the pier to the parking lot, and we stood there and talked. She said she missed me. She said marriage scared the hell out of her, because her parents' divorce had been so ugly. She said I scared the hell out of her, because with my money, other women would always be after me; and because if things ever got uncomfortable between us, she knew I'd bail.

knife for the deed, but she couldn't do it.

What could I say? She was right. I'm not exactly known for sticking out tough times. But I made her a pledge that day, a solemn promise, that I wouldn't take the easy way out—not with her. She had no reason to believe me, but I took her hand and held it over my heart in hopes she could feel the ache that was there and know how much I meant what I said. Did she? Or was she hurting so much herself that she was willing to take the chance?

It doesn't matter. All that matters is that she agreed we should try. I kissed her long and hard, and then I picked her up and carried her out onto the pier to where the launch was moored.

Zoe was sitting in the stern with her back to us, looking out over the crowded marina, and I knew I had a problem on my hands. She was like that statue by Rodin—even from behind, I could see the hurt in every line of her body. In a low voice, I explained to Diane how Zoe had washed up on the island and that—for the time being, anyway—we were taking care of her. "She can hear," I said, "but she doesn't talk, so I've been teaching her signing."

Diane gave me a dubious look, but she took my hand as I helped her aboard and introduced her. "Zoe," I said, "this is Diane. The girl in the picture you saw." As if she hadn't figured that out.

At the sound of my voice, Zoe turned around. Diane signed, "Hi, Zoe."

Zoe returned a lackluster greeting; then, "I'll cast off," she signed, and began to do just that.

Zoe sat by herself in the stern all the way back to the island, while Diane sat with me at the helm. I was so caught up in Diane that I didn't do more than glance at Zoe occasionally to make sure she was OK. But that night after supper, I found Zoe down on the beach, standing and staring out to sea as the tide washed in around her ankles. I tried to tell her what a great lady Diane was, and how much I knew they would like each other. Wishful thinking, right? Zoe only looked up at me with clear gray eyes and signed, "Will you and she marry?"

"Yes," I said, and waited.

I expected anger. I expected her to slap my face, or beat on my chest, or push me away and run off; but she didn't do any of those hysterical teenage things. I wish she had. Instead, her chin quivering, she signed, "I hope you will be very happy." Then she turned away and walked off down the shore.

I saw almost nothing of Zoe for the next two weeks. It wasn't just that Diane took up all my time—which she did. I wanted a license and a preacher as soon as possible, and that meant a lot of running around in a short space of time. I wanted to hire the best hall, and the best orchestra, and the best caterers—and Diane didn't want any of that. So I settled for flying her mother up from Florida, and arranging a honeymoon on Aruba.

But Zoe—Zoe just faded into the background, wandering off on her own, climbing up to the widow's walk that circled the roof, sitting out on the rocks that stand like sentinels on the east end of the island. She wasn't a problem—anything but!—and it was just easier to let her be when I had so many other things on my mind. I told myself I'd deal with Zoe after things settled down a bit.

On a Sunday afternoon, Diane and I were married in the garden of my mom's house, with just our mothers and Zoe and a couple of friends for witnesses. Afterward we all went to the mainland for a wedding dinner at the yacht club, then came back to the island, since our flight to Aruba didn't leave until the next day. Diane and I spent our wedding night in one of the gabled guest rooms on the third floor.

I woke just before dawn, and it took me a minute to figure out what had disturbed my sleep. Diane was sprawled beside me, her hair fanned out across the pillow, her breathing slow and even. At first I just lay there watching her, amazed that I was actually married to her; then I realized the door to the hallway was ajar. About that time, I heard the front door slam.

Slipping out of bed, I hurried to the window and saw Zoe running across the shadowy lawn, headed for the east end of the island. Had she come into our room—? Cursing silently, I turned from the window; and as I did, my eye caught something glinting on the floor in the gray light of imminent dawn.

It was a knife. It was a really big knife. I picked it up and looked closer; it was old and corroded, as if it had been underwater for a long time.

That's part of the legend, you know: If the little mermaid killed the prince on his wedding night, his blood would turn her legs into a tail again and she could return to the sea. Her sisters brought her an enchanted knife for the deed, but she couldn't do it. Instead, she gave her own life …

Seized with an unreasonable panic, I pulled on my clothes and ran after Zoe. The path across the island was dark with shadow, but that didn't slow me. I've run that path a thousand times; I could do it with my eyes closed. I reached the eastern shore just as the sun was rimming the horizon.

Zoe couldn't see it. The rocks there are tall enough that they were shielding her from its rays; but she was scrambling up the tallest of them toward the top, toward the white-gold sunlight. "Zoe!" I shouted after her. "Zoe, wait! Zoe, I have to talk to you! Zooo-eeeee—!"

We didn't make our flight. When I came back to the house with Zoe's clothes that I had found on the rocks, Diane became hysterical, thinking it was her fault. I knew it wasn't about her, and I said so, but it didn't help. Diane wouldn't leave until we'd searched the

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An artist looks to science and classical techniques to create worlds of fantasy and science fiction.

donato: the science of fantasy

By Karen Haber

Donato Giancola is a dragonmaster. No, he doesn't ride 'em. He paints them, in loving detail, with such careful attention to musculature and skeletal construction that you would swear these colorful beasts actually existed.

"I decided that I would take my dragons more seriously," says the New York-based artist. "I wanted to make them real creatures. Weight-bearing beasts of burden in certain instances, and in others, battle-ready."

In order to do so he resorted to the antithesis of fantasy—science. He spent hours thinking about how a dragon's wings might attach to its body, and doing extensive research on anatomical structure. His primary inspiration came from dinosaurs and bats. "I thought of the dragons as large bats with little Tyrannosaurus rex feet in front."

It was the sort of challenge he most enjoys. "A creative challenge is where I have the most fun. Especially when it

involves research." Especially when the task requires him to visit the Strand Bookstore, where he can revel in his favorite research tools, books.

That research has paid off in works like *Dragonsight* and *Dragonshadow,* where the dizzying perspective, luscious color, and treatment of light distinguish these paintings as something special. In *Dragonflight,* the translucence of the backlit wing membrane reminds the viewer of the marbled texture of Earth as seen from space. In *Dragonshadow,* the wings shimmer with all the color and delicacy of butterfly wings.

But Donato is much more than a master of dragons. This Chesley—and other—Award-winning artist, a painter of both fantasy and science-fictional subject matter, is a longtime fantasy fan.

LEFT: Dracopaleontology *illustrates Donato's interest in anatomical structure. BELOW: A cliff-hanging perspective creates momentum in* Farseekers. *RIGHT: Cubist and classical influences can be seen in* Smaug, *from* The Hobbit.

"I was a gaming addict," he remembers. "Appropriately enough, I started off with *Dungeons & Dragons*. Eventually, I began to modify the rules, increase spells, etc. Finally, I came up with my own game. I would make my own map grids—even my own grid paper. I guess I wasn't happy playing in somebody else's imagination."

His older brother introduced him to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and from there he immersed himself in the literature of science fiction and fantasy.

"I've always loved *The Hobbit* and all of J.R.R. Tolkien's work. That's why I was so excited to receive the assignment from the Science Fiction Book Club to paint covers for the reissued *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. I'm a big fan and these paintings were very, very satisfying on both a personal and professional level."

What's more, they brought about a change in his artistic perspective. "I'm more interested in the painting as a finished object now than I was," he says. "I'm more concerned about it as a beautiful object in and of itself." What this means is that Donato is spending more time in the studio working on larger more personal paintings, focusing his work more toward individual collectors and buyers than art directors.

"I'm really excited and gratified by the amount of interest that collectors have shown in my work. It's motivated me to do more personal paintings."

Whether he's painting portraits, book covers, or collectible gaming cards, Donato employs the time-honored techniques of Northern Renaissance artists like Rembrandt and Hans Memling. Then he adds a pinch of Islamic pattern or, perhaps, Cubist fragmentation just to keep things interesting.

"I rarely use any vanishing-point perspective. It's the Cubist influence: fracturing the vectors. I watch for strange overlaps or foreshortening. I'm very, very conscious of composing my pic-

tures along a two-dimensional layout. That helps them read graphically."

Donato relies on classical technique as the foundation of his fantastic visions. "I'm still learning. Copying artists is one way to do it. I really believe in looking at other artists. Their craft, their ideas. That's why being in New York, with access to the museums, is so important. Being able to stand in front of a 15-foot painting instead of flipping through a catalog really makes a difference."

Although he admires computer-generated art, he says that it's not for him. "Drawing is what dictates my artistic choices. I want to be able to meld the idea of abstraction—pure gesture—with the reality of what I'm going to make. The computer is a useful research tool but it hasn't replaced my love of books."

Donato's appreciation of old-world traditions in art began with his family's love of handmade objects. "My grandfather worked in stone and I've always cherished the things that he made. When I teach, I feel like I want to pass on my love of craft. It's a legacy."

"That's why I view each painting as a work of craft. I want it to be much more than an illustration."

"Like many successful artists," Donato demonstrated his gifts early. "My first paintings were probably cave paintings in my mother's womb." From the age of six he drew tanks and aircraft based on the war comic books he read and models he made. A huge roll of paper—a gift of his uncle—enabled him to draw epic pictures, 30- or 40-foot-long battle scenes, with his younger brother.

Science fiction and fantasy entered his life with the *Star Wars* movies. "*Star Wars* was a big influence," he says. "*The Empire Strikes Back* was the movie for me. Chills went up and down my spine each time I saw it." From there he moved on to *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. However, when it came time for college, he attempted to be practical. "People from Vermont don't become artists," he says sardonically. He signed up to study electrical engineering. Unsurprisingly, he found that he was more interested in his mechanical drawing classes and, mid-term, dropped his engineering curriculum.

When the dust had settled he enrolled in the painting program at Syracuse University. "I was aiming for their illustration program but got into their painting program instead. And it's affected every creative decision I've made since."

"Studying painting really opened my mind up to the way we make art. I got to learn about abstraction, about art history, composition, color, and narrative storytelling."

Through Syracuse University he made contact with the professional illustration world, meeting artist representatives at portfolio previews. Donato quickly obtained representation and, diploma in hand, moved to New York to be closer to the action. But the hard work was just beginning.

By day he toiled at the Society of Illustrators. At night he would work long hours—sometimes until dawn—to provide samples for his rep., hoping that one would do the trick. Finally he got an assignment from Wal-Mart: paint new covers for the classic science fiction novels *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain. He was on his way.

Over a decade and several awards later, Donato has become increasingly interested in art for art's sake. "I'm focusing on quality now, not quantity."

Part of his artistic outlook is a deliberate determination to change the "babes-in-bras" and "heroes-in-battle" formulae of fantastic art. "I want to break the stereotypical icons of the genre. I'm trying to make males look heroic through body language or lighting without being in conflict. And I prefer to use untypical models."

In *Mother of Winter* (Barbara Hambly, Ballantine), Donato achieved several goals. "I really pushed hard to do a beautiful elderly woman on the cover. And I appropriated the curvilinear patterns of Islamic art to tie the painting together, overlaying the image and integrating it. So I met the publisher's needs for an attractive subject, and mine as well." (A science note here: The machinery Donato depicted in this work is a detail from the Babbage analytical engine, a precursor of the computer.)

For accuracy he uses photographic references, either posing and shooting them himself or using professional photographers and

"I want to break the stereotypical icons of the genre."

models. Of course, sometimes the models are less than professional: for the cover painting *The Queen of Demons* (David Drake, TOR), Donato shanghaied fellow artists Stephen Youll, Steve Ellis, and Dorian Vallejo as models for a tricky bit of action. "They're on the far right of the painting: that's Stephen being tackled by Steve, and breaking through the stair railing as Dorian swings a mace nearby."

In case you're wondering, Donato himself makes an appearance in the painting. He's the bearded figure on the stairs. "I'm the only one who's not engaged in combat, just watching."

In addition to the Chesley Award for best paperback cover, 1996, he's received a silver award from "Spectrum II: The Best of Contemporary Fantastic Art," and the Jack Gaughan Award for Best Emerging Artist at Boskone 35 in 1998. That same year, Donato was Artist Guest of Honor at Lunacon, where he received Best of Show and Best Professional Artist awards.

Donato enjoys the awards but says that he's in it for more than the accolades—or even the paycheck. "Craft comes first," Donato says. "I'm concerned with making a nice painting. It has to work for me as an object—a painting in and of itself—before it can work for anybody else." ❧

Fans of fantastic art won't want to miss Donato's Web site: www.donatoart.com

ABOVE: This painting graces the cover of the Science Fiction Book Club edition of The Lord of the Rings. *LEFT: Classical meets Islamic in* The Doors of Obernewtyn. *OPPOSITE:* Archangel *appeared on a Magic tournament card released in Japan.*

Magic 101

Remember The Poppycocks? Man, they rocked. I loved that band. Really.

Memory is a funny thing. You think you remember something clearly, but do you ever really? If your memory is faulty, how would you know? Memories can be notoriously unreliable.

"Hi, Breeze," a female voice said on the studio request line. "This is LeAnn in Gastonia. Can you play me 'Crying Shame' by The Poppycocks?" She sounded old enough to be my mother. Old enough to have lots of memories. Perhaps she remembered hearing that song played at her high school prom. She might have a memory of seeing The Poppycocks on the Ed Sullivan show. Maybe she even recalled owning the 45 rpm single when she was a teenager.

But "Crying Shame" by The Poppycocks was a figment of her imagination. I should know. I put it there.

Breezy Knight was my on-air deejay name. Yeah, yeah, I know it's corny, but it worked fine for an oldies station in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was 20 years old, working my way through college on the 10 to 2 late-night shift at Magic 101 FM, playing songs that were already old long before I was born. Magic 101 specialized in songs from the sixties—nostalgic tunes for the aging baby boomers like LeAnn in Gastonia. It wasn't the kind of stuff I liked to listen to, but it was a job.

"Hey there, LeAnn," I said, trying not to sound too surprised. I knew how to put the proper laid-back honey in my voice for a midnight shift. "Great song. Can you sing me a couple of bars?"

By Brian Plante
Illustration By Chuck Demorat

LeAnn gave it a go, singing in a boozy voice, "It's a shame, do-do, such a shame, do-do, when you don't even know her name, do-do..."

"Atta girl, LeAnn," I said, cutting off the phone line. "Here they are then, from 1966 ... The Poppycocks, with 'Crying Shame,' do-do!"

I had the song on a cart, ready to go, so when the next record finished up, I'd play back LeAnn's request along with my intro, from the tape delay. Simple stuff. The magic of radio.

I was the youngest of the on-air staff at Magic 101. Most of the deejays and newsreaders were in their fifties or older. Jeez, we had *interns* older than I was, but when puberty hit, my voice deepened to a throaty growl that was made for radio. I deejayed a couple of semesters at the college station at UNCC, but I sent out some audition tapes to the local commercial stations because the other student deejays said I didn't sound like a student. *Pipes*, is what they call it in the biz. I've got major pipes. With a little cheesy reverb behind it, my voice sounded just like the legendary deejays from the heyday of Top 40 radio. WABC in New York. WLS in Chicago. WKNR in Detroit. I had heard clips of some of the old guys on the Internet. Cousin Brucie, Dan Ingram, Harry Harrison. *Seventy-seven, double-you-A-B-Ceeeee—whoopee!*

LeAnn in Gastonia probably thought I was an old fart like that, but my on-air personality was the least of my deceptions. The truth was that the group called The Poppycocks had never existed, at least not in 1966, and the song, "Crying Shame," was recorded by some of my college buddies and me in the basement of my buddy Mike's parents' house. Mike was the lead singer and guitar player in our band. You might think you remember The Poppycocks from 1966, but you're wrong. It was us. In the 00's.

It started out as a goof. A goof on a psychology assignment at UNCC, where I still attended classes in the daytime. We had the whole fall semester to design, conduct, and write up an original experiment for Psych 205. Professor Leightner expected us to run the experiment at the college, and use the other students as our guinea pigs, but I thought I could be a little more creative with the assignment. The course was an elective, so there was no reason I couldn't have some fun with the thing. It just got a bit out of hand.

I remember the first time I played the record on the air. It was a Wednesday night, a little before midnight. Perhaps I was a bit nervous, but I cued up the cart and went into my intro as if it were just another record from the station library.

"See if you remember this one," I said into the microphone. "It's 'Crying Shame' by The Poppycocks."

The song wasn't even finished playing when a call came in on the request line: "Who the hell are The Poppycocks?" the voice said. "I never heard of 'em."

"Um, I think they were out of Texas," I lied to the caller. "They were big on the West Coast."

"Sheesh. Can you play some Beatles, maybe? How about 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand'?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Coming right up. Thanks for calling."

At first, I thought I had blown it big time. What was I thinking, trying to slip that song on the radio? But I played it again the next night during my shift, and got no complaints, and I played it a third time on Friday night.

After a weekend off to think about it, I began to have my doubts, so I didn't play the song at all the following week. But then, on Friday night, I got the call. It was LeAnn in Gastonia, asking for "Crying Shame."

Mike, Jimmy, and Cory were the other guys on the song. We normally played alternative rock in bars around the Charlotte area, under the group name Narcissus. Or, we used to, until I landed the gig deejaying at Magic 101. The guys really should have kicked me out of the group and found a replacement then, since we could only play the occasional gig working around my radio schedule, but groups like that were more about college buddies hanging out together than making money, so they let it slide. And there was no way I was going to give up my salary at the radio station for the crappy money that the local bars paid to bands like us.

"It's an experiment for my psychology class," I explained to the guys in the group. "I'm trying to demonstrate what's known as False Memory Syndrome. That's like when you tell a kid that some teacher molested him when he was in kindergarten, and then he grows up thinking he remembers stuff that never really happened."

"So, what are we gonna do, fake out some kids or what?" Jimmy asked.

"Nah," I said. "I want to see if we can get people, old people, to remember a song that never was. Like something from back in the sixties. We can record a bogus track that sounds like the songs from back then, and I'll play it at the radio station, just like it's a legitimate oldie. We'll make up some authentic-sounding name for the band, like The Castaways or something."

Jimmy and Cory liked the idea right off, and I could see in their faces they were up for it. It was a good college prank.

"But what's in it for us?" Mike asked, not convinced. Mike was always the moody one. Perhaps it was because he was a year older than the rest of us, but Mike always took things way too seriously. I guess he was still a bit pissed off at me for taking time away from the band to work at the radio station. He didn't like oldies or Magic 101, but he was the best musician in the band and I needed him to buy into my little scheme.

"Well, we'll get to hear ourselves on the radio," I said. "Real radio, not some lousy college radio that no one listens to."

"*Old fart* radio," said Mike. "And nobody will even know it's us. You want to call us, what, The Castaways? That is so lame."

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Something like that. Unless you can think of a better name."

Mike didn't say anything for a few seconds, but I could see the wheels were turning. He was thinking about it.

"Come on, it's a cool idea," I said. "And I really need it for my Psych project. Besides, when the experiment is over and I write up the paper, we'll let the audience in on the joke. If we can pull it off, it might gain us a little local fame."

"Or infamy," said Mike.

"Infamy's cool," I said. "For a rock band. Why not?"

"Castaways," he grumbled. "That blows. Call the phony group The Poppycocks. That sounds kinda dirty."

"OK, The Poppycocks it is," I said. "So you're in, then?"

"Yeah, yeah. But you'll owe us big time for this. No jerking us around with that deejay crap if we line up some good gigs, all right?"

"Only if it pays better than the radio station," I said. "I'm not that desperate."

"Son of a bitch."

"Bastard."

"Asshole."

We whacked each other on the shoulders, hard enough to make me wince.

"OK, then?" I said.

"Yeah," he agreed.

It probably didn't sound like much of a meeting of the minds, but that was how it was between Mike and me. It was a done deal.

We listened to some old Beatles and Dave Clark Five songs off the Internet and borrowed bits and pieces to concoct an old-new song that could have fit right in with those moldy oldies. Jimmy and Mike already had a lot of semi-pro recording gear, and the problem was trying to make the equipment sound old, not necessarily good. We ran a lot of stuff out from the board to some guitar speakers and then back into a couple of cheap microphones to capture a bit of the grungy basement reverb and dirty up the pristine digital sound, and we made the gear sound 40 years older than it was.

As they used to say in those ancient days, it was a real gas.

"Hey, Breezy, howya doin'?"

The caller on the request line sounded like a typical female 50-something boomer. Probably a young grandma by now. My audience.

"Doin' fine, this gorgeous night," I purred into the microphone. "To whom do I have the pleasure and how may I serve you, m'lady?"

"This is Cheryl in Pineville," she said, "and I'd like to hear 'Crying Shame' by The Poppycocks."

Ding. One more data point for the experiment.

"Ahh, great choice," I said. "One of my all-time favorite bands. Did you know their lead singer, Mike, later had a recurring role as Chuckles the Clown on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show?* What a talent, huh?"

"They were the best," Cheryl in Pineville said.

"Well here they are then, The Poppycocks with 'Crying Shame.'"

I cued up the record and entered the song in the deejay's log. For the first week, I had been fudging the log, and writing in the name of some other song whenever I played The Poppycocks song. "Bus Stop" by the Hollies, or "Never My Love" by The Association. This was late into the midnight shift, so it wasn't very likely anyone was bothering to check my logs against the archive tapes we kept, but now I was actually writing "Crying Shame" by The Poppycocks in the log. Might as well include management in the joke, I thought.

The song was actually starting to take off. I was getting two or three requests each shift for "Crying Shame," which was pretty good for that late at night. Especially for a song that never really existed.

Instead of taking the cart with The Poppycocks song home after my shift, I shelved it in the heavy rotation racks, right in front of the deejay's desk. Most of the day shifts were pretty rigidly playlisted, unlike the night shift where I played a lot of requests, but I figured if I left it out there, other deejays might pick it up by mistake and play it. Who knew?

I grew up with all the memories of having a faithful canine companion without all the mess.

When I was a kid, I used to have a dog. Skipper was his name. Skipper was a Shetland sheepdog—a sheltie—and I remember walking him around the neighborhood, and feeding him from the great big sack of Purina Puppy Chow that Dad bought at the supermarket. Skipper used to curl up at the foot of my bed on rainy nights when Dad would let him stay in the house.

But Skipper died when I was five years old, run over by a United Parcel truck. And it was my fault. I was supposed to keep Skipper in the back yard, where we had a doghouse for him, but one day I left the back gate open and Skipper got out. That animal was my responsibility, and I had failed.

I never wanted another pet after that.

It wasn't until I was in high school that my Dad told me the truth about Skipper. My parents and I had been arguing over something stupid at dinnertime, and I made a dumb remark about the dog being the only one in the family that had ever loved me.

"You never had a dog," Dad said.

"I'm talking about Skipper," I said.

"There was no Skipper," he said. "Your Mom and I made all that up because you kept bothering us for a pet when you were six, and we knew you weren't really going to take care of it if we got one."

"But I *remember*," I insisted. "Skipper used to sleep in my room. I took him on walks around the neighborhood."

"That was just what we kept telling you, son. You'd ask if we could have a pet and we'd say stuff like, 'Don't you remember Skipper when you were little? Skipper used to sleep in the room with you. You used to walk Skipper to the park.'"

"But I really remember having a dog in the house."

"When you were very young," Dad said, "there was a TV show on for a couple of seasons called *Andy's Family.* You used to watch it religiously. The dog on that show was the dog you remember."

I didn't want to believe it, but when I looked to my Mom, she shook her head and nodded in agreement. Yes.

"Why would you do such a cruel thing?" I asked.

"It would have been cruel to give you a dog and then have you not take care of it," my Mom said. "When we told you how Skipper died, you didn't want a pet anymore. It was easier that way."

They were probably right. At that age, all kids want a dog or a cat, promising to take care of it, but the parents always get stuck with the job. I grew up with all the memories of having a faithful canine companion without all the mess.

"How y'all doing, Dan," I said, disguising my voice. It was the midday "Lunch Orders" request hour and I had gotten through on the request line to the deejay, Danny O'Boyle, a guy I had only met a couple of times at some station publicity functions. "This is Duane in Kannapolis, and I'd like to hear the best band ever to come out of Amarillo, Texas. Do you know who I'm talkin' about?"

The deejay was clueless, but he played along: "I think so, but suppose you tell me."

"I wanna hear 'Crying Shame' by The Poppycocks!" I said, putting some enthusiasm into my voice.

"Who?"

"The one and only Poppycocks, of course," I said. "Ain't they the greatest?"

"Um, wait …OK, here it is. Yeah, I got that one. Thanks for calling."

On the radio, "Society's Child" by Janis Ian was still playing. The deejays always took requests on the tape delay while a record was playing, just in case the caller blurted out something obscene. When the record ended, I heard my voice asking for the best band out of Amarillo, Texas, but instead of asking, "Who?" the deejay had cut in with, "Why that could only be one band. Here it is, your Lunch Order—the one and only Poppycocks with 'Crying Shame.'"

A month went by, and The Poppycocks went into regular rotation. Not my phony insertion into the late-night lineup, but actual *scheduled* play dictated by the programming director. The PD was Larry Jeter, a business type in his thirties. Like me, the oldies stuff wasn't his preferred music either, and he generally relied on charts and tipsheets to guide his programming choices. "Crying Shame" was getting lots of phone requests throughout the day, and it had made it onto Larry's radar. The fact that he was unfamiliar with the song wasn't really important. If the people wanted to hear it, he'd put it in the rotation.

The second weekend in October was going to be a Twin Spin weekend at Magic 101, which meant we played two songs in a row by each artist. I told the guys in the band that we needed another song from The Poppycocks to keep up the gag. If anyone requested "Crying Shame" that weekend, the deejays might be a bit surprised to find there *were* no other songs by The Poppycocks. Sure there were lots of one-hit wonders through the years, but even those records had B-sides.

Mike wrote another song, "I'll Give You a Ring," that was both clever and authentic sounding, and we recorded it in his basement in one night. After I threw that one in on the Twin Spin weekend, it

started getting requests, too. Mike was a genius with that old sound. He was just born at the wrong time.

Magic 101 ran a regular call-in show on Friday nights called "Memory Lane," where listeners talked about their favorite groups and songs from the old days. I was in the studio early one Friday night, and listened in on the show from the jock's lounge before my air shift started.

"Here's a big favorite around the station," the deejay said. "It's The Poppycocks, out of Amarillo, Texas. Call in now and tell us what you were doing when this song was popular, way back in 1966."

I thought this was going to be one of those embarrassing moments for the deejay when he asks for listeners to call in and no one does. God knows I'd had plenty of stretches like that, late at night when I had to wonder if anyone at all was out there listening. Who could call in with memories of what they were doing in 1966 listening to The Poppycocks when the song never existed back then?

But call they did.

"Hello, Jackie, this is Todd in Matthews," the caller said. "I remember the first time I drove my Plymouth Valiant, with the slant-6 engine. The very first time I turned on the radio, 'Crying Shame' was playing. Now, every time I hear the song, I think back fondly to that car and all the good times I had in it."

"Hey, thanks for sharing that, Todd," said the deejay.

Thanks indeed, I thought. Either Todd in Matthews was crazy or lying. Or maybe he genuinely believed he remembered listening to The Poppycocks in the sixties.

"'I'll Give You a Ring' was on the radio when my husband proposed to me," said another listener.

"Did he really give you a ring?" asked the deejay.

"Yup."

"Ah, great memories, great times, and great music. I think we have time for one more."

"Hi, Jackie. Aaron in Concord, here. I remember when The Poppycocks played at Independence Arena. I think they opened for the Lovin' Spoonful, but it was The Poppycocks I remember most. Love that 'Crying Shame' song."

"Yeah, everybody likes that one," said the deejay. "Thanks for calling. Now, here's another tune from the same era, by a band...."

I didn't really hear the rest of the deejay's intro for the next record. I was too jazzed over the listeners' memories of The Poppycocks. This was the sort of anecdotal evidence I needed to spice up my Psych paper. People actually "remembered" the song, and the group. The guy who thought he saw The Poppycocks in concert was obviously mistaking them for some other group, but he sounded so sure of himself. I scribbled a few quick notes, so I would remember the details for the term paper.

"What do you say we play a concert as The Poppycocks?" I said to the group at one of our rehearsals. "The Magic 101 Oldies Night concert is going to be held on Thanksgiving Weekend, and I know I can get us booked."

"Play an oldies show?" Mike said. "How the hell are we gonna do that? The Poppycocks are supposed to be a bunch of old guys by now."

"You'd be surprised at what passes at the oldies shows," I said. "From what I've heard, most of the groups only have one or two original members left, and the bands are filled out with hungry younger musicians, gigging for a paycheck. Hell, there's lots of groups playing the oldies circuit that don't have *any* of the original members of the band they're supposed to be. They've just fallen heir to the legal group name through circumstances."

"You can't need us to do this for your friggin' term paper," Mike said.

"Nope," I replied.

"This is *so* wrong," Cory said with a sly smile. "We could dress up like a bunch of old geezers, then throw off the disguise when we're finished with our set."

"The audience is dying to see The Poppycocks ... *one more time*." I said.

"You know you're crazy, don't you?" Mike said.

"I can get us $5,000 for a 20-minute set," I said. This was significantly better money than the chump change the local bars paid us for a whole night's work.

"Jeez, it'd be a ...a *cryin' shame* to miss out on something like that," Jimmy said. "Think of the publicity if we could pull it off!"

Mike wasn't convinced, but the three of us out-voted him, and he gave in. The Poppycocks were going to hit the stage.

I played the first two Poppycocks songs on my air shift a lot in the weeks leading up to the concert, and I threw in a couple of new tunes we recorded, to get the audience a bit familiar with them before the concert. We had to play a 20-minute set, maybe five or six short songs that all sounded like something you thought you remembered hearing years ago. We stole melodies from Herman's Hermits. We copped a few licks from The Rolling Stones. Some Beach Boys harmonies. We sounded damned good for a sixties band, even if we didn't look the part.

Jimmy thought we should come out in bellbottoms and tie-dyed shirts, but I said no to that. A group like The Poppycocks, on an oldies tour like this, wouldn't try to dress like it was still 1966. They'd be older guys, playing for older audiences. We'd have to dress like a bunch of old guys to fit the bill. Maybe even wear gray wigs and put on some makeup to make us appear more mature.

Mike was mopey throughout all the plans we made, and he was having second thoughts. He took his music like everything else—way too seriously—and he was really just going along with us because we were buddies, but I could tell his heart wasn't in it.

"Come on, Mike," I said. "A gag like this is supposed to be fun. We pull this off, and we'll be legends in the local music scene."

"Maybe that's not what I want to be remembered for," he said.

We needed Mike. Badly. The songs were mostly his, and his guitar and vocals were the musical center of the group. Without Mike there was no Poppycocks. Or Narcissus. Or whatever we wanted to call ourselves. Without Mike, we were just a bunch of buddies hanging out together. He was the one who made us a band.

"It's only 20 minutes," I said. "Twenty minutes for $5,000. Then we can take off the wigs, wipe off the makeup, and tell everybody what we did. I'll write up the experiment for school and get an A. Maybe I'll get fired from the radio station for this, but we *will* get noticed for the music. Mostly your music."

"This is not my music," he said. "This is only an imitation of those early bands."

"Oh come on," I said. "Music is music. Those oldies bands weren't really that much different from the bands today. The styles change, but talent always shows through. One day the bands of today, like Narcissus, will be oldies too, you know."

Mike brooded. Cory and Jimmy seemed not to notice, ebullient over the prospect of a high-paying gig, but Mike worried me.

The Magic 101 Oldies Night concert was scheduled for the Saturday after Thanksgiving. The Temptations were the headliners, and I wondered how many of the members were really the ones on the records and not fill-ins. I suppose the audience didn't really care—as long as the performance sounded like the records they remembered.

I knew The Poppycocks would sound more like their records this night than any other band at the Magic 101 Oldies Night. We had to sound more like the records because we *were* the original members, and our voices and playing hadn't been dulled by 35 years.

Earlier on the day of the concert, we did a sound check. I wore a

disguise—a gray wig, mustache, and glasses, hoping no one from the station would recognize me. Nobody seemed to notice that our musical equipment was all current-day stuff, but even the real old-timers used a lot of modern crap to simulate their sixties sound.

It was at the sound check that it finally hit Mike. All the other musicians, even the Johnny-come-lately fill-ins, were old enough to be our parents. We sounded all right on our run-through—better, in fact, than most of the other groups. But one guy, I think it was the drummer for Herman's Hermits, made a remark loud enough for all of us to hear: "Who let these children up on the stage? For crying out loud, where are their parents?"

"Those great memories will be replaced with other memories. They'll forget they ever loved these songs."

We laughed along with everyone else who heard the remark. Everyone except Mike. After all, we were playing this Poppycocks thing for a joke. But Mike didn't have a good enough sense of humor when it came to his music, even these bogus oldies. He wasn't really playing along with this as a gag like the rest of us. He wouldn't admit it, but deep down he was hoping through some miracle that these songs were going to vindicate his musical talent.

After the sound check, he sulked in the van, out in the parking lot behind the arena.

"This is not what I was expecting," he said. "These guys on stage are *way* old!"

"What did you think, that the Temptations were going to show up looking like the 20-year-olds on their album covers from 35 years ago?"

"Nobody's going to believe us up on stage with these other bands."

"Nobody will care," I argued. "Just as long as we play the old songs they remember. That they *think* they remember."

We had a few hours before the show began, and I hoped that a couple of beers in the back of the van would let Mike shake his inhibitions and give him the courage to get up on the stage and sing The Poppycocks' material. But as the sun went down and the early arrivals started streaming into the parking lot, it got worse, not better.

If the other musicians at the sound check looked old, some of the audience members were positively *ancient*. Bald guys with big beer bellies stretching out over tent-sized blue jeans that were faded from years of wear, not applied at the factory. Wrinkle-faced grannies with white hair come to boogie down and recapture their youth. A few families showed up for the show—and their *kids* were older than we were. This was my first Magic 101 Oldies Night concert and the audience was not at all what I had expected. These were my listeners at the radio station, and frankly, my initial reaction was that I wished I'd never seen them. Maybe it was better that LeAnn in Gastonia and Cheryl in Pineville were just voices on the request line. But I was still ready to go through with the concert.

Mike, on the other hand, was not. "Look at that one," he'd say, pointing through the windows of the van at the arriving audience. "Jeez, do you think that one even has any hearing left?" And, "That guy looks like he'll take up a whole row of seats by himself." Or, "Oh God, please tell me there won't be any groupies from this crowd chasing us after the show."

All of us in the van laughed at the arriving audience in the parking lot, but Mike's laughter was the nervous kind, not the fun kind.

"This is stupid," Mike said, when there was only a half-hour left until showtime. "Nobody's gonna buy this. I'm outta here."

"They've been listening to it on the radio for the past 10 weeks," I said. "They're buying into it hook line and sinker. They *remember* us."

"This is not what I want to be remembered for," Mike said. "And these are not the people I want to be remembered by."

"Well then, let's do it for the $5,000!" Cory said. "And bragging rights for the rest of our lives."

"I don't think I want to go through with it," Mike said. "It's all wrong."

"It's only one night," I said. "Twenty stinking minutes, and we're done. It's too late to back out now."

"It's never too late. There's five other bands. No one will miss us."

"We'll disappoint all our fans," Cory said.

"Yeah, our fans. They'll all hate our guts when they find out we're just a bunch of college kids. Those great memories will be replaced with other memories. They'll forget they ever loved these songs."

Mike *did* care about the songs. Even though we all agreed it was just for fun, these were his babies, and he was afraid for them. Afraid of what would happen when our sham was revealed.

"I'm not playing," he said. "You can go on without me, but I'm going home."

Well, the truth was, we *couldn't* go on without Mike. He sang the lead on all The Poppycocks songs we had rehearsed. His lead guitar was the musical center. If he left, The Poppycocks were done.

Mike walked away, across the parking lot in the direction of Independence Boulevard, where the bus ran. Cory and Jimmy both knew we couldn't go on without Mike, so I told them to take the van and drive him home. I'd stay at the concert, as a representative of Magic 101, not as a performer. I'd make an excuse for The Poppycocks to the crowd and say one of them was sick or something. Or maybe I'd just end the sham and confess to the audience that there were no Poppycocks and it was all just a school assignment. It didn't matter; we weren't going to be The Poppycocks again after this night.

The concert went off, and I did a walk-on to intro the first band. I think most of the audience was shocked at how young I was, figuring "Breezy Knight" to be someone their own age.

Herman's Hermits sounded pretty good—just like their records, although I don't think the guy singing lead was the original "Herman." What was his real name? Peter Noone, I think. Well, it wasn't him, but they still sounded pretty good, and the crowd loved it. Lou Christie looked kind of old, but when he sang "Lightning Strikes" and "Two Faces Have I" his falsetto voice soared like he was a young man again. The audience went wild, and I gained a lot of respect for most of these acts. It may not have been the music of *my* youth, but it was as valid for the folks who were the right age for it as my music was to me. On my air shifts at the radio station from that point on, there would be genuine enthusiasm when I intro'd a record.

The Poppycocks were listed in the program as the next-to-last act, right before The Temptations. I told Larry, the programming director, that there was a problem with the group and asked if I could make the announcement for the crowd. The applause was still dying down for The Platters when I trudged onstage to make apologies for The Poppycocks.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," I began, "you all know the greatest band to come out of Amarillo, Texas."

"Poppycocks!" they shouted.

"'Crying Shame,'" they demanded.

"Well, I'd like to bring them out for you," I said. "B-ut I, um, have to confess…."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a movement on the left side of the stage. It was an older man wearing a black and glitter shirt,

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for what seems like an inordinately long time. When he finally stands up in the morning light, he's in a ruined castle whose windows disclose another world.

All this happens swiftly in a mere 13 pages. Such pacing is typical of Reichert's literary strategy; she keeps her plot chugging along at high speed, with plenty of chases, war councils, and feats of somewhat clumsy derring-do on Collins' part. A pleasant gift, this economy, amidst some of the bloat found in current fantasy.

Where Benton Collins has ended up is the world of Barakhai, a land of some small magics but whose dominant weirdness is the fact that almost every human spends half of his or her life in animal form. The rat who deliberately led our hero here is a man named Zylas. Quickly we meet a horse/woman named Falima, a hummingbird/man named Ialin, a dog/boy named Korfius, and several others. This crowd constitutes a rebellion against the reigning King Terrin and his consort—a fellow Earthling gone native, a woman previously vanished from the same laboratory.

Well, the reasons for the rebellion and the many twists and turns of the action must remain concealed in this review. But some aspects of the book (the first of a series) that can be mentioned include Reichert's willingness to focus on the mildly sexual aspects of the animal-human dimorphism; her generally apt humor; and her empathetic characterizations (although maybe some of the hero's nerdiness could have been trimmed). Aside from a couple of awkward phrasings (can a "knock" itself really "hammer" against a door?), Reichert's prose is streamlined and does its job efficiently. Her ending seems a tad rushed, but I estimate that further books in the series, which I look forward to, will smooth over that gap.

The Bone Doll's Twin, Lynn Flewelling; Bantam Spectra, NY; mass-market paperback; 524 pp; $6.99.

Lynn Flewelling has done a magnificent, impressive job with this novel, her fourth (which also proves to be, despite lack of notice anywhere on the book, plainly the first installment of a long saga). Like few before her, she has managed to capture some of the same flavor found in T.H. White's classic, *The Once and Future King* (1958), as well as in Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea books. Factor in some essence of Mervyn Peake (in the form of a partially ruined estate inhabited by a mad mother), and you have a winning combination.

Flewelling sets her story in a well-thought-out, vivid world of three kingdoms animated by a convincing belief system focused on several very tangible divinities. Culturally, Flewelling assembles a rich tapestry of beliefs, customs, traditions, and history, somewhat Arthurian in nature, all conducing toward utter involvement by the reader.

Her world is in flux when the story opens. The land of Skala, long ruled in a matrilineal fashion, complete with women warriors, has gone astray. A wrongful King sits on the throne, old gods and practices are denied, and consequently the wounded world has begun to run off its tracks. (I should mention here that Flewelling is absolutely non-preachy, non-dogmatic and non-sentimental about this underlying gender-based schism. There's nothing of the partisan or chauvinist in her subtle, balanced, cool-headed depiction of events.)

The one hope of restoration, fostered by Skala's wizards (notably the pair of Iya and Arkoniel, teacher and apprentice), lies in a certain girl child just about to be born. If this heir to the ancient line can grow to maturity and take the throne, all will be well. But King Erius has already killed all other rivals, and this infant is slated to be assassinated as soon as she enters the world.

But Iya, Arkoniel, a witch named Lhel, the girl's father, and a few others conceive a daring plan. As Princess Ariani gives birth to twins, a switch is made through magic. The girl takes on her male womb-mate's semblance, and he hers. Then, in a heart-wrench-

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ing sacrifice, the male is smothered, so that Prince Erius can view a female corpse.

From this heartless but necessary murder arises all the rest of the tale. "Prince" Tobin will grow up under the shadow, quite literally, of her dead brother, unwitting of her real destiny. The novel of maturation that follows, touched with both large heroisms and commonplace miracles, brings Tobin to the threshhold of womanhood, with her future career all in doubt. Flewelling invests large amounts of narrative time and talent to solidify the reality of her characters, and we leave this volume with the sense that although Tobin's triumph is assured (we know this thanks to interpolated diary snippets from Tobin's future self), many more vibrant mysteries remain to be explored.

The Rundelstone of Oz, Eloise McGraw; Hungry Tiger Press, CA; hardcover; 224 pp.; $24.95.

Many are the hands that have tried to craft Oz books following the death of the original Royal Historian L. Frank Baum, with varying degrees of success. Martin Gardner's recent *Visitors from Oz* (1998), which transported Dorothy and crew to our world amidst off-key mathematical speculations, was a mixed bag at best. But I can happily inform Oz-ophiles everywhere that the book under discussion today satisifies all the criteria of a worthwhile sequel-by-other-hands.

McGraw and her daughter, Lauren Lynn McGraw, have written two other Oz books—*Merry Go Round in Oz* and *The Forbidden Fountain of Oz*—which I have not sampled. Unfortunately, the elder of the two authors recently died, so this book sadly marks the end of future collaborations. And that's too bad, because *Rundelstone* exhibits a lightness of touch, a fertility of invention, and a sureness of pacing that add up to an alluring performance.

The book starts in high places—the court of Ozma—then shifts for the majority of the tale to the doings of some heretofore unknown commoners, before bringing the more famous personages back onstage for the climax. In this pattern, McGraw harks back to many other Oz outings.

The main focus of our story is a traveling wagon full of live, human-sized puppets, mastered by a mortal named Pizzicato Furioso. Together, human and marionettes form the Troopadours, ambulatory actors who roam Oz. Unfortunately, in the town of Whitherwood they fall afoul of a magician named Slyddwyn, illegal possessor of the Rundelstone, which is able to transform one object into another. Slyddwyn quickly lures the troupe to his home, turns them all—save the young wooden "boy" named Poco—into various bits of furniture as practice, then forces Poco to become his servant. The remainder of the narrative finds the plucky but timorous Poco seeking to extricate himself and his chums from the wizard's clutches.

McGraw has lots of fun playing with issues of concealed identity, and makes Poco such an empathetic soul that he almost substitutes for the absent Scarecrow. While the successful outcome is almost forgone, there are plenty of sprightly surprises along the way.

Any review of this book would be remiss in not mentioning the accompanying artwork by Eric Shanower. Over one hundred of his remarkable b&w illustrations make him nearly co-author of the whole delightful reading experience. Shanower's lines are so deft and sharp, affectionate without being saccharine, old-fashioned without being antique, that he should be nominated the Official Artist of Oz.

You may reach Hungry Tiger at 5995 Dandridge Lane, Suite 121, San Diego, Ca 92115, or at <www.hungrytigerpress.com>.

Discovering H.P. Lovecraft, Darrell Schweitzer, ed.; Wildside Press, PA; trade paper; 163 pp.; $17.50.

This collection of critical essays on the most original horror writer of the 20th century originally appeared in 1976 in a format very hard to find, either then or now. So on its 25th anniversary, we must be grateful that it has been revised and updated and made easily available to all HPL devotees. The essays here, by fiction writers, fans, and scholars, range from short appreciations (Robert Bloch's "Notes on an Entity") to long textual interpretations of a single story (Dirk Mosig's "The Four Faces of the Outsider"). There are humorous takes on the Master's work as well, such as Schweitzer's "Character Gullibility in Weird Fiction." (Schweitzer swaps hats to also provide the serious and fascinating "Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany," which seeks for and finds one-to-one correspondences between the work of the two men.) But perhaps my favorite piece comes from the late Lin Carter (supplemented with notes by S.T. Joshi and Robert Price): "H.P. Lovecraft: The Books" assembles the facts on the 66 occult texts—real and imaginary—mentioned in HPL's fiction, from the *Necronomicon* on down. If you're looking to impress your friends with the full scoop on the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, your dream-quest has been answered.

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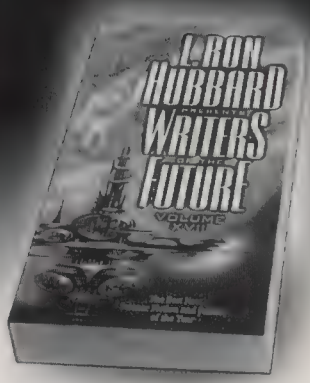

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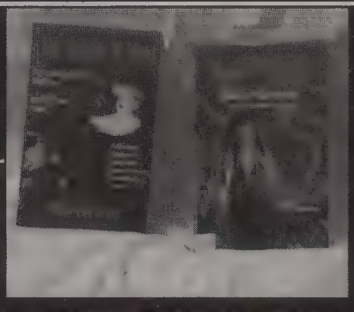

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VERY SPECIAL AGENTS, starring Vera Vangard, Suzannah Underwood, and Anita Durst is now in its final stages of development. It brings to life the eternal war between angels and vampires that time itself forgot. (It was written, directed, and produced by Mike Cervello and co-produced by Anita Durst.) With the skills of master editor Oriol Puig (who worked on such productions as Star Wars and The Matrix) VERY SPECIAL AGENTS features some special effects that blow away the competition for anything else in its class.

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folkroots

Continued from page 26

After *Dracula*, the only vampire novel with comparable psychological depth has been Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*. Like *Dracula*, what makes *Interview* a masterpiece is that it can be read on so many levels, ranging from an allegory of the San Francisco gay scene just prior to the discovery of AIDS to a disguised psychobiography in the vein of *Dracula*. *Interview* took nearly a decade to write (unlike its sequels), and it reveals, within its structure, a complexity the subsequent works lack. For example, *Interview*'s narrative structure is based on *Heart of Darkness* (with an unnamed narrator telling the story of an unnamed journalist who interviews the vampire, Louis).

The physiognomy of names in *Interview* is remarkably parallel to what I've shown for *Dracula*. Louis, the name of the central character, comes from Louisiana, the state in which Anne Rice was born. "Louisiana" breaks into "Louis," "I," and "Ana" (a form of Anne), to suggest the character's connection to Rice (which also happens to be a major crop raised in that state). The gender inversion of Anne Rice into Louis makes additional sense if one recalls that Rice's name was originally Howard Allen Frances O'Brien. *Interview*'s other central character, Lestat, can be read as "The State," referring once again to Louisiana, but also, and more interestingly, as a Frankified sound anagram taken from the name of Rice's husband, Stanley Rice. Stanley inverts into "Leystan" or, "LeStan," whose sound is very close to "LeStat" given the muffling of the final consonant in French. Lestat, as readers know, is French, referring to the "Frances" in Rice's original name.

Even this brief reading of the physiognomy of names in Rice's *Interview* shows us once again what the great renderings of literary vampires have in common. They are complex means of exploring the haunting and unresolvable tropes of blood, sexuality, contagion, and the repressed. To return to my opening point, it is no wonder that *Buffy* has had such an influence on its predominantly teenage audience. In the present age of AIDS and school violence, the themes illustrated by the symbol of the vampire—blood, contagion, sexuality, and repression—are as much a part of our culture as they were in the 19th century. We can only look forward to what the next incarnation of this remarkably expressive and grisly cultural icon will tell us about ourselves.❧

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the sea-maid

Continued from page 69

whole island, and the Coast Guard and police had searched the waters and the mainland for miles.

About three weeks later the FBI called us, saying although they hadn't located Zoe, they thought they had identified who she was, or had been. Very timely of them. A girl named Susan had disappeared in Virginia after her sister was killed in a boating accident. The two girls had been swimming when a motor boat ran over the sister and sliced up her legs. She bled to death while Susan was trying to carry her to safety. I guess to the shrinks, that makes pretty good sense: A psychological shock like that could make you stop talking and forget how to use your legs.

Mom tried to convince us, and herself, that Zoe had simply vanished the same way she came. She would show up somewhere else, Mom said, and brighten someone else's life. After all, no body was ever found. I didn't say anything to take that hope away from her.

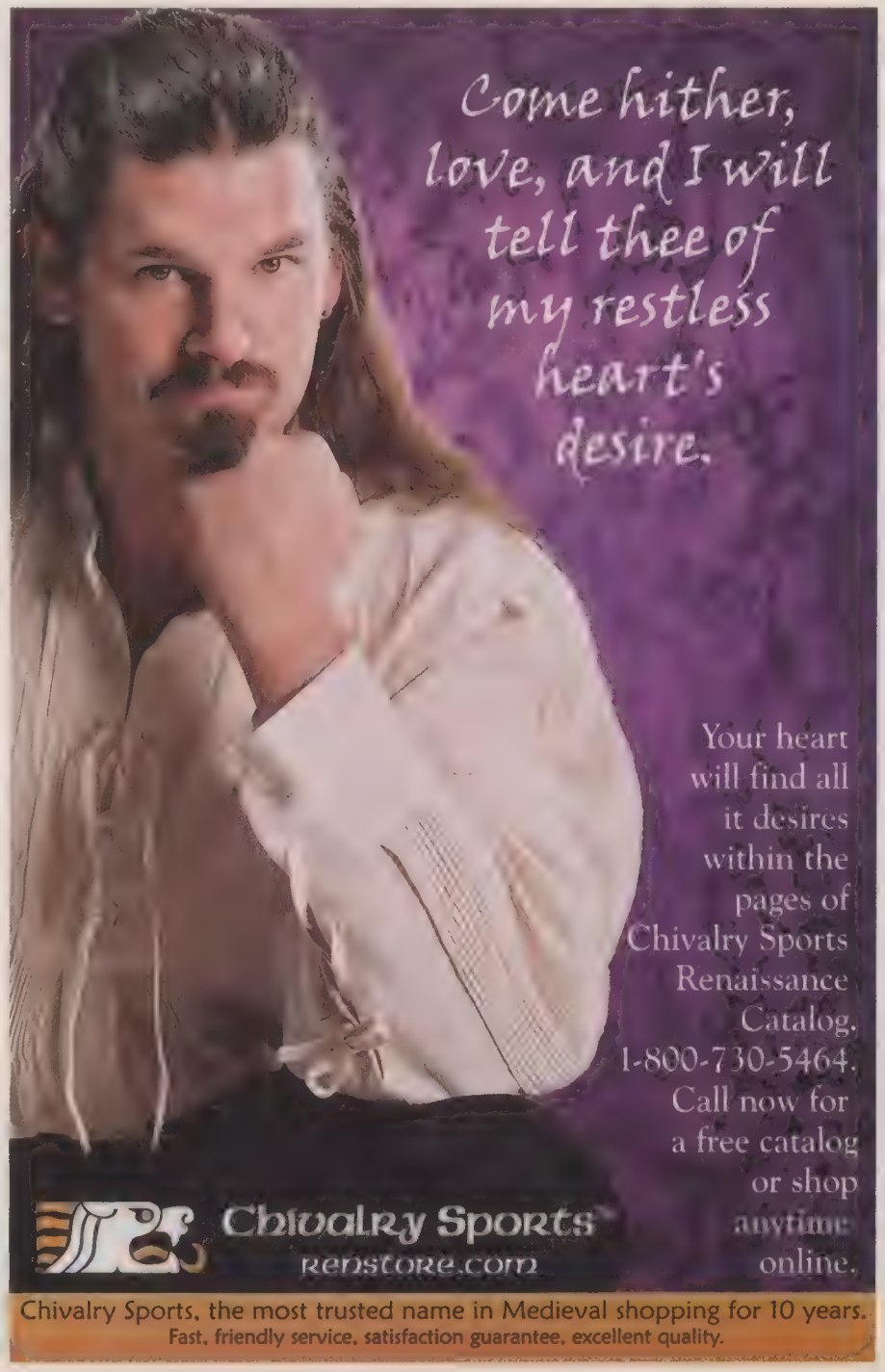
That was over 20 years ago, and Diane and I are still together, although it hasn't been easy. Diane started taking pills and—well, it was ugly. She's been clean for seven years now, but there were a lot of times I wished to hell I could walk away. I couldn't, though. Not for our kids, and not because I made her that promise, but because someone else paid a high price for us to be together; and if I let it fall apart, then she paid it for nothing. I won't let it be for nothing.

In 20-odd years, I've never told anyone what I saw when I chased after Zoe that morning. What's the point? They'd say I was delusional. But I reached the base of the rocks just about the time Zoe reached the top. She didn't jump, and she didn't fall. She stood up on her toes, throwing her arms wide in the first rays of sunlight; and as I watched, her body stretched, thinned, became porous, and then just … blew away. Like sea foam.

In the Andersen fairy tale, the mermaid's sacrifice does not go unrewarded. Instead of simply perishing as sea foam, she is transformed into one of the ethereal Daughters of the Air. As such, after three hundred years of good deeds, she can receive a soul and attain heaven. The three hundred years can be lessened if she enters a house where the children are being good.

I've been telling my kids that story since before they were old enough to understand it. I tell them they have to be especially good at Grandma Fitzhugh's house, because the mermaid comes there a lot. They were awfully confused when the Disney version came out, and the mermaid married the prince. Why would she want to marry a jerk like that?

And what they really don't understand is why, in the movie, she is called Aurora, when they know very well the mermaid's name is Zoe.❧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By Eric T. Baker

From medieval Japan to gothic England, horror knows no bounds.

The question of the month seems to be, "If we can't play turn-style combat, why can't we at least pause the game?" Two new role-playing video games that bring this question to mind are *Art of Magic: Magic and Mayhem* from Bethesda Softworks Inc. and *Throne of Darkness* from Sierra Studios. In each game, the emphasis of combat is different, but both ask the player to lead teams of characters against opponents run either by the computer or by other live players. The combat in both games is real time, not turn based, and neither has a "pause game" feature. Thus actions have to be assigned characters on the fly. The more characters, the more enemies, the more out of control the player feels.

Both *AoM* and *ToD* can be played as either single-player campaigns or as free-for-all battles against the computer or other players. *AoM*'s single-player campaign begins in the fantasy land of Northern Albion. The player takes the role of Aurax, a youth with a Scottish accent who has just become a man. His sister informs him that he is capable of using magic, just before she is kidnapped by the forces of Chaos. The rest of the campaign consists of the quest to get her back. Aurax is joined by other characters as his quest goes on, and he is aided by the creatures and beings he summons to fight for him.

As can be guessed from the title, the emphasis in *AoM* is on magic. Aurax starts with no weapons and, if forced to fight hand to hand, he kicks at the enemies—not very effectively. Fortunately, he starts with two useful fighting spells and gains more as time goes on. Spells are managed in the portmanteau interface in between levels. They are assembled from ingredients and talismans in the portmanteau and then cast using mana. The cost of casting each spell varies with the character's alignment: chaotic, lawful, or neutral. This is more of an issue in the battle game where players choose their wizard's alignment on a sliding scale. Aurax, in the campaign game, is lawful. Mana is regained between levels and from certain sites and items in the levels.

Pirates, troll gods, and oni are among the adversaries players will face in the games reviewed in this column.

Obviously, the emphasis of the battle game is combat. The campaign game also has lots of combat, but not all the challenges have to be fought, and not all of the fighting ones have to be met the same way. For instance, on some levels, Aurax must protect sites from the enemy rather than take sites

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from the villains. On another, he has to use his magic to slip unnoticed into an enemy stronghold. Still, even in campaign mode, *AoM* is not going to be confused with an adventure game.

There is a lot to recommend *AoM*. The spell system is varied and interesting. The story is engaging enough and the graphics are attractive. It is only the interface where the game falls down. There are a few hot keys, but most of the action is controlled with the mouse. The mouse uses a hot cursor, which means that clicking on something triggers different actions depending on what it is. There is nothing wrong with this as it is intuitive and easy to learn, but it is best combined with either turn play or a pause button. The more characters and creatures there are on the map, the harder it becomes to select the right character to give an action to, much less target the right enemy. In a first-person shooter, no one minds if the enemies are scurrying around the map while the player tries to draw a bead on them. In an RPG, however, no one wants to have to chase a moving target across the map with the cursor, trying to click on the enemy and not on the ground behind him. It is critical to click on the enemy because that will launch the fireball. Clicking on the ground will send Aurax running toward the enemy where he will be hacked to death. Without a pause key, it is best to save often.

Sometimes you want to be Gandalf, sometimes you want to be Ogami Itto. *Throne of Darkness* is a game for those days when a player feels the need to strap on a virtual sword and lay waste to the monsters and bandits of feudal Japan. Players take control of seven different samurai, four at a time, and battle their way out of their lord's castle, across the countryside, and through the castle of the Dark Warlord, Zanshin.

Whereas *AoM*'s campaign game walks players gently into the game world and gives them several easy challenges to defeat while teaching them the interface and the world, *ToD* puts the player in charge of three characters and walks them right down the stairs into the battle. It is not uncommon for players' first reaction to be, "This game is impossible," but it isn't. Keeping alive and getting kills is a matter of learning the interface and putting its power to use.

ToD was designed by two of the people responsible for *Diablo*, and it has a variation of that game's constant clicking interface. The player's characters fight as a unit, never straying far from one another, but the player controls only one at a time. The player must click on an enemy for each blow he wishes his character to strike. The computer's characters, thankfully, don't require this constant attention. Characters

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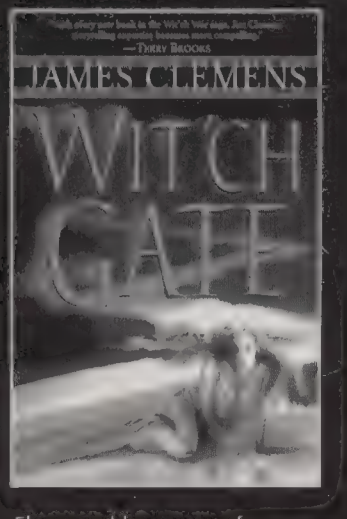

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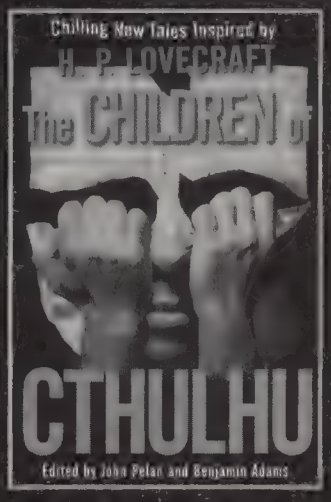

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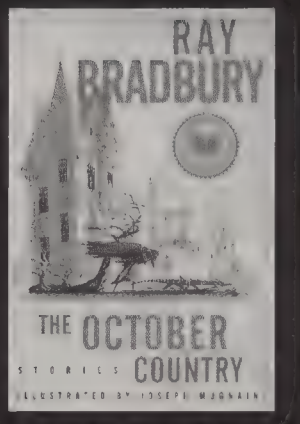

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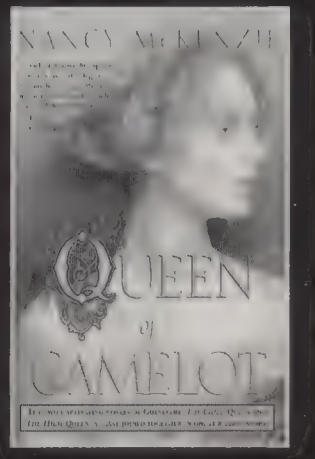

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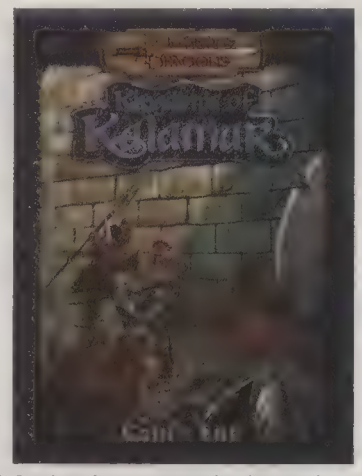
change weapons with the push of single button, and hitting the space bar cycles through player's characters on the map, allowing the player to quickly change who he controls.

Samurai join the player's party as the game progresses. Eventually there are seven types available, each with their strengths, although there is a lot of overlap. For instance, there is a spell-casting samurai, but all the samurai can cast spells. There is a swordsman samurai, but all the samurai can use swords, and so on. Players manage the party of samurai two ways. One is the tactics display, which governs how the samurai fight together, who attacks, who defends, who uses what weapon, and so on. An editor that allows players to customize tactics and three or four well-designed tactics make combat much more survivable, but the real key to the game is the second way to manage the samurai, and that is the daimyo interface.



The daimyo's magic allows him to teleport the samurai from wherever they are back to his throne room, and from the throne room back to wherever the player's character is now. While in the throne room, samurai heal, repair equipment, learn spells, have their items imbued with the powers of the relics they have found, and are even raised from the dead. The raising from the dead really knocks down the daimyo's strength, so *ToD* is best played by keeping a sharp eye on the samurai's health meters. As soon any one samurai's health slips dangerously low, teleport him away and replace him with a fresh samurai. In a way this turns traditional video games on their head, because in *ToD* it is the good guys who (when properly managed) have an endless supply of fighting men.

That said, players have to be fans of this sort of whack-a-mole action to enjoy the game. And while it is easy to change weapons for the samurai, it is slower to change spells. The sort of complementary spell casting and ordered attacks that would be possible in a turn-based or at least a pausable game don't happen in *ToD*. The strategy is all between battles, getting the equipment right, loading the right spells, and setting the proper tactics into the hot keys. Once the fight is joined, it is matter of clicking as fast as you can on the enemy and always watching for some samurai who

FANTASY B

Anyone who's been involved with role-playing games for the past 10 years or so will notice a trend among fantasy RPGs: They are moving away from the standard "elves and dwarves vs. goblins and dragons" motifs, and more toward the unexplored nooks and crannies of the genre, worlds that don't host the usual cast of characters, or ones that are *almost* like our own. *Underworld* (Sinister Creative Systems, softback, 164 pp., $19.95) is one of the latter, and dares its players to find magic in one of the most unlikely places—in the worlds that exist in the sewers, subway tunnels, and hidden places beneath the streets of New York City.

Underworld's concept is a rather strangely beautiful setup. It seems that the jumbled, chaotic mess that is New York City's subway grid isn't as random as it might seem at first glance; on the contrary, it's laid out that way because it channels the very essence of magic. It seems that the original designers of the system knew that by looping the tracks into the forms of certain powerful runes, they could channel the power of Radiance, magic in its purest

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form and something all too rare in the modern world. Who or what these designers were is yet to be revealed, but the extent of their machinations is such that, over one hundred years after the birth of the subway, the world underneath New York has twisted itself into a sort of dark faerie land, populated by mythical monsters, people unstuck in Time, and all manner of unlikely heroes and unsavory villains.

Character creation for *Underworld* is relatively straightforward; you simply pick a breed and a guild, add in a few extra background options, and you're ready to go. Most of the breeds in *Underworld* aren't really races per se, but variations on the good old human, such as the Lost (accidental time travelers) and the Nomads (men and women who can't die, but lose their memories as they get older). There are also the Ferals (homeless animals that can talk), Legendaries (living embodiments of myth), and the Mole People (who are pretty much what they sound like). The guilds are somewhat like character classes; in an effort to make sure that they are always useful to someone, the denizens of the underworld have banded themselves together into specialized groups that fulfill the needs of the population. The Bravos are sell-swords and brawlers, Librarians are charged with keeping the lamp of knowledge lit, and the list goes on.

The basic resolution mechanic of *Underworld* is similarly simple. Instead of working with dice, the designers created a coin-based pool system; the better you are at something, the more coins you get to flip, and the more heads you get, the better you do. There's little variation in the theme when it comes to combat and magic, and the simplified rules keep games going without resorting to needless page-flipping and index-scouring.

If *Underworld* has a weakness at this point, it's probably lack of material. You get a lot for the comparatively small price you pay for the basic rules (which include an introductory adventure), but I personally want to know more about the setting outside of what they've provided thus far, including who's manipulating the subways to collect Radiance, and what the underworlds of other big cities look like. As a northern Virginia native, I can tell you that I've already formulated some interesting theories about what goes on underneath Arlington National Cemetery at night.

For those wishing to get away from the standardized fantasy RPGs that have dominated the market thus far, *Underworld* is an excellent choice. Just be warned—what's underneath your feet might just be stranger than anything in a land far, far away.

By Jim Stutz

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needs to be teleported out.

The best paper and dice role-playing game on the planet has a new scenario pack out. *Weep* is six adventures for Atlas Games' *Unknown Armies* rules system. Each is something different, not just in what they contain, but how they are presented and how they are meant to be played. *UA* is a game of modern horror where what is going on in the characters' and players' minds is often more important than the actions the characters take. In "Drink to That," for instance, the scenario is entirely driven by the players. It is designed so that their characters are drawn into the life of a certain NPC, one who will never seek them out, but whom they will find reason to look up. When they do, then that scenario advances, until at the end they are forced to decide the fate of a character they have come to know rather than a plot hook who was thrust upon them. The other five scenarios are just as inventive and just as interesting, even "Stoon Lake," where the only things for the characters to find are what they bring themselves.

Alderac Entertainment Group's *7th Sea* setting shares one of *Vampire: the Masquerade's* problems. It is a big, interesting, compelling world, but it is contained in a lot of different books and it is hard on a Game Master to absorb it all and then convey it to his players. This problem is exacerbated for *7th Sea* because it is both an RPG and a collectible card game. Even if a GM owns all the RPG supplements, he is still missing parts of the story and background contained in the CCG. Thus, *Waves of Blood*, the new sourcebook for both the RPG and the CCG versions of *7th Sea* is a must-have for those already trying to run a campaign in Theah, or those who want to start. The beginning gives a detailed explanation of the CCG's storyline, from its first decks to the present. There is even an illustrated timeline. There are new rules and artifacts and explanations of how to convert cards from the CCG to characters in the RPG, and vice versa, but it is having the history and the characters all in one book that makes this supplement great reading and worth having.

Wizards of the Coast's *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting for their third edition *Dungeons & Dragons* game lists over 150 play testers on its back page. It is a mark that even though there are lots of terrific supplements being put out for *D&D* these days under the open license, Wizards still owns the oldest and most popular worlds in which the game is played. The *FR* book contains a full-color poster map of the Forgotten Realms. There are also new races and prestige classes, plus new gods and monsters and locations. Most welcome of all, there are two short adventures to get the characters together and into the world. All of this is presented in a hardback, full-color book packed with illustrations to bring its tens of thousands of words to life.

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the return of the *Ravenloft* campaign, now published under license by Arthaus, a division of White Wolf. *Ravenloft* was TSR's horror campaign, so it makes sense for it to be published by the people who created the market for roleplaying horror games. This version of the *Ravenloft* setting stays faithful to the original; it uses Wizard's d20 System, not WW's Storyteller mechanics. Vampires are a focus of the game, but not *the* focus. And they don't travel in clans. This is gothic roleplaying in the old Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley sense of gothic. The book contains everything needed to play a *Ravenloft* campaign except an introductory adventure.

Temple of the Troll God is a 48-page adventure from Fast Forward Entertainment. It uses the d20 System and is for a party of midlevel characters, but it is set in the Dragonelves world of their Web-based collectible card game. This adventure is part of their Green Races trilogy of adventures and stars goblins, trolls, and ogres. It is a wilderness adventure set far from the cities of men. The villains are troll priests who make frequent use of live sacrifices and whose god is dedicated to vengeance. It is the players' job to find out what they are up to and put a stop to it. The book has more maps than pictures, which is the way an adventure should be if it can't have both.

Coin's End, a 64-page adventure for Kenzer and Company's Kingdoms of Kalamar setting, another d20 System open-license world, has both maps and lots of pictures. It is part of the ImageQuest series, which simply means that wherever there is text that should be read directly to the players, there is also a picture that can be shown to them. In addition to the maps and pictures, the information and statistics for monsters and NPCs is organized in charts at the back of the adventure so the GM has all he needs right where he can find it without having to flip back and forth in the book. The art is pretty good and the plot moves the characters through a variety of landscapes and adventures.

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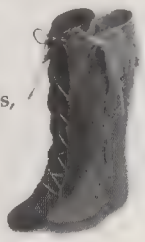

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the burning man

Continued from page 48

She turned and ran past the Burning Man, leaping through the curl of his flame, letting it cleanse her.

Behind her, as she ran across the square, she heard a scream. Turning she saw Furth writhing in pain, his tunic aflame. The Burning Man's hand had snagged the collar of his garment. The Burning Man had saved her.

Galea turned and ran.

A hundred years later, the cult of Josit had disappeared, and the Burning Man was alone with his screams. Perhaps a woodsman or farmer happened upon the crumbled town, but the ghostly keening drove them away.

After another hundred years, a family of hedge magicians used the Burning Man's town square as a winter home. They cooked their food by his heat, built a shanty villa around him, and lived there a dozen years until the oldest child caught the shack aflame while he was playing with fire.

A great warrior and inventor used the Burning Man's heat to fill a hundred silk balloons. He used the balloons to found a small empire that crumbled within his lifetime.

Perhaps if someone had watched the flame of the Burning Man over the course of his sentence, they might have seen the flame dwindle and flicker, like a candle which had come to the end of its wick. But the Burning Man burned for a thousand years, while the people around him burned far more quickly.

His foot slipped free from the dirt. Pettio fell and he rolled, patting the flame, covering himself with dust that sizzled and sparked.

"Is it done?" he yelled. "Is it done? Yet why do I still burn?"

Although the flame no longer rose high into the air, and though his feet were now free, the heat blazed along his arms and legs, wrapped itself around his chest, and snuggled within his seared lungs.

He stood, his muscles straining. He was free, but still he burned. Pettio stumbled, then caught himself by a sapling that had grown nearby. In his grip, the trunk of the tree smoldered and caught fire.

He jumped away, falling against a pile of wood and rusty scrap. The wood was dry and caught flame immediately. He stood in the midst of the bonfire, shaking in anger, until the fire had consumed everything around him. He bore the anger and the pain, as he had for a thousand years, with the vision of Gwena hovering before his eyes.

He was not free of the curse. It had merely changed.

But in the night, he began to walk. Through the deserted crumbled landscape. Bits of walls of some long-decayed town still stood. Behind him, a trail of burning footprints marked his path.

He avoided what he could, trees, brush that might burn. And wandered through the night.

At dawn Pettio reached a brook, a stream of clear, cool water. Without thought he stepped into it, lay himself flat, letting the water flow across his blazing body.

Relief cleansed his mind. For the first time in a thousand years, the pain ceased.

Although the water boiled in the eddies between his legs and in his armpits, it still flowed around him, bringing cessation from the flame.

He did not move for three days.

But then he saw below him the collection of dead fish near the edge of the water. The heat from his body had killed the fish, and Pettio felt sorrow.

He stood, and the pain rushed back to him. Yet he did not lay back into the water. Pettio left the stream and followed the charred steps he had left in his walk there. He returned to the town square.

But this time, through the pain and the veil of flames, he observed the landscape. The people had come and gone, and though the town had risen and fallen, the land stayed the same.

Hills he recognized from his youth. The mountain into which the wizard Hospidar had built his castle still hung above the old town site.

The sight of it brought forth memories from a millennium before. He remembered Tremaine; he remembered his friend speaking to him through the flame.

Pettio stood in the center of the town square and looked up at the castle. Then he looked down, falling to his knees. He brushed at the sand and dirt, digging until he found the stone tablet that Tremaine had left for him.

He read it, then began to climb the broken and craggy steps to the castle.

He clutched the castle door, hugging it, and whatever magic that had kept it intact yielded against the fire of his body. It burned for three days, but Pettio waited. He did not sleep, nor did he eat. The curse had blessed him with no distractions save the pain.

Pettio pushed upon the remains of the door and entered the castle. Everything within, the furniture, the books, the drapes, and the wall tapestries were rotted away, just piles of dust. The castle was empty and silent. Nothing else would burn there.

He found the steps to the tower and climbed them unhurriedly. One thousand years had made him a patient man, but he ran the last 20 steps.

The door was ajar.

Within, Gwena lay upon a bed of crystal. Elephantine feet of ice ran from her body to the floor. Pettio thought she might be dead, but her head turned as he entered.

"Pettio."

"I am here for you. I was delayed, my love."

She smiled, and he knelt beside her.

His hand touched hers, and the flame licked

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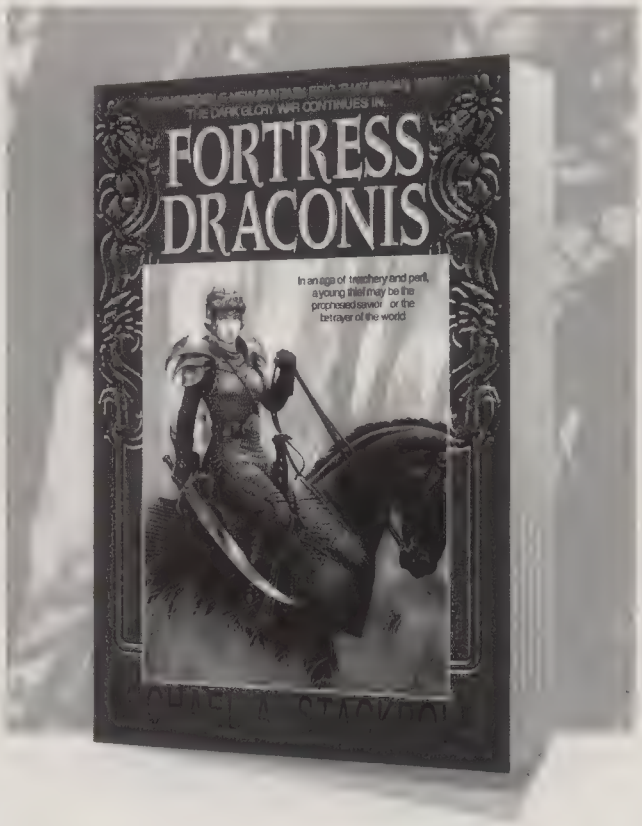
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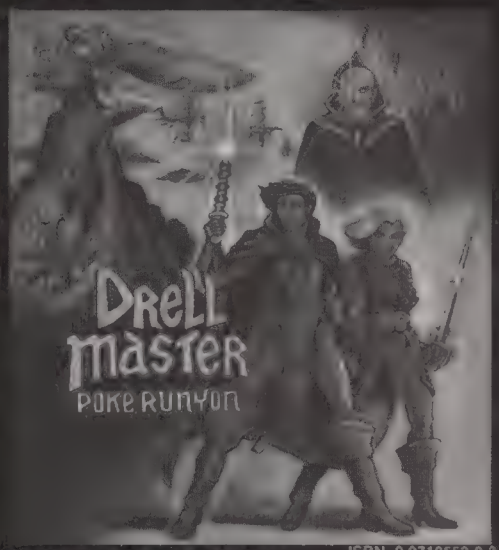

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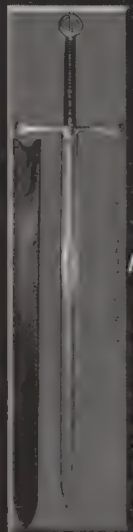

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magic 101

Continued from page 81

waving me over to the wings. I glanced at him quickly and nodded my head toward the audience, as if to say, "Hey moron, I'm a little busy right now, speaking to these 10,000 people, OK?"

The old guy shook his head, "No," and put his forefinger on his lips to shush me, then frantically waved me over to the wings.

"Hold on one second, everybody," I said into the microphone, and walked over to stage left, shrugging my shoulders to the confused crowd.

"Hey, sorry we were late, kid," the guy in the black and glitter shirt said. I noticed a bit of a Texas drawl in his voice. Behind him stood three other old guys, also dressed in flashy stage outfits. One had a guitar strapped on, and another had a bass. "Our bus broke down in Columbia, and we had to rent a van real quick to get here," he said.

"Um, who *are* you guys?" I asked.

"We're The Poppycocks," he said. "You were about to announce us, right?"

"I ... I heard The Poppycocks weren't coming tonight."

"Nonsense," said the guy. "We ain't missed a show yet, and we ain't figuring on starting tonight. Now if'n you'd be so kind, let the good people know we're ready to rock and roll."

I walked back out to the microphone, looking over my shoulder at the four men in the wings. Who were these guys? And how did they figure to just show up at an oldies show like this and go on for an imaginary band? *My* imaginary band? What nerve!

Well, it was all a big joke anyway, wasn't it? I mean, even if we— Mike, Jimmy, Cory, and I—had gone out and performed as The Poppycocks, it was just play-acting, right? Rather than disappoint the packed house and announce the band wasn't here, or worse, that they didn't exist, why not let some other Poppycock-wannabees go out there and give it a shot? What was the worst that could happen? If they got booed off the stage, at least I was off the hook. From the side of the stage, the four guys looked eager to go out and perform.

Frankly, they looked more like The Poppycocks than Mike, Cory, Jimmy, and I could ever have. They were the right age for it, and had the flashy stage costumes for a show like this. The guitarist even had a Fender Telecaster that looked like it had been around since the old days.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," I said, "the next act is the best band to come out of Amarillo, Texas, and a local favorite here in the Magic 101 listening area. Here they are, The Poppycocks!"

The crowd roared, the guys took the stage, and I rushed off to watch what happened from the safety of the wings. This could have been real bad.

But it wasn't.

The Poppycocks played "I'll Give You a Ring," and three other songs I had never heard before, although they sounded a bit familiar. They didn't sound exactly like us, the real Poppycocks, but they sounded all right. Maybe like we would have sounded in another 30 years, if we were lucky enough to keep at it that long. There was something about these guys that was so *familiar*, though. It's like I could remember them from somewhere. Somewhen.

The ersatz Poppycocks really got the crowd jumping before sending them into a frenzy with "Crying Shame" as their closing number. These guys were pros—like a band that had been on the road for 35 years, maybe. Why did they look so familiar?

The Temptations came on last, and they were real good, too, as you would expect. But I came away from the Magic 101 Oldies Night concert with happy memories ... new memories ... *real* memories, of The Poppycocks. They would forever be one of my favorite bands.

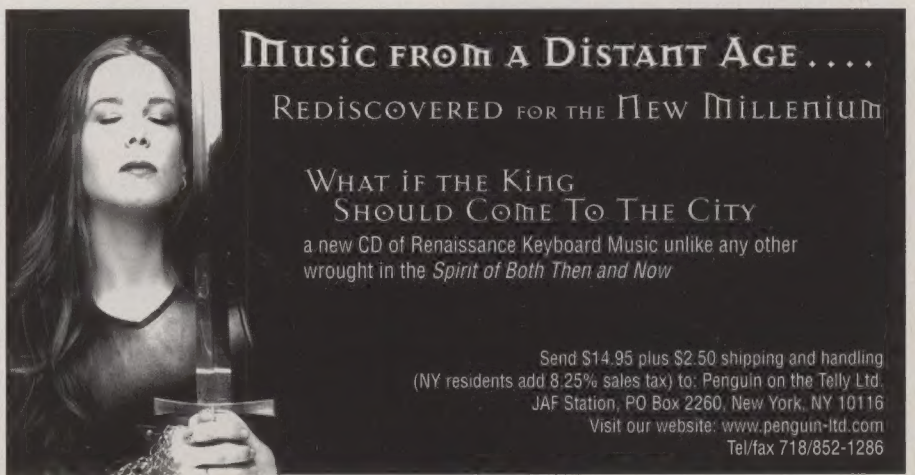
At the end of the semester, I got an F on my Psych term paper at UNCC. Professor Leightner didn't believe that I had made The Poppycocks up. He *remembered* having heard the group when he was in high school. He even brought in their greatest hits album to prove it. I can't explain that. Where did that record come from?

I never did graduate from UNCC, but it didn't really matter. I stayed on at the radio station, playing oldies with some newly found respect for the music, and the audience, too. As for those old guys masquerading as The Poppycocks, well, why the hell not? It's not like anyone else was using the name, and the audience needed some faces, some *appropriate* faces, to go along with the music. And the memories. Magic 101 continued booking them at the Oldies Night concerts, and we kept playing the records at the station. Whenever I visited different cities, I always tuned in to the local oldies station, and I've heard The Poppycocks records being played in lots of other places. One of the records was even on a Burger King commercial a few years back. It was one of the records I remember making in Mike's basement. I really do remember that. I'm almost positive.

The band—Mike, Cory, Jimmy, and I—broke up not long after the Oldies Night concert, as most buddy bands eventually do, so I guess there won't be any new-old songs from The Poppycocks. At least, none coming from us.

A few years later, my mom died, and I fell heir to the family photo album. There are a lot of old memories documented in that book. One faded photograph shows me at five years of age, sitting in the back yard of the family house. A Shetland sheepdog nuzzles my outstretched hand. I can barely see the edge of Skipper's doghouse in the background.

Memory is a funny thing. If my memory is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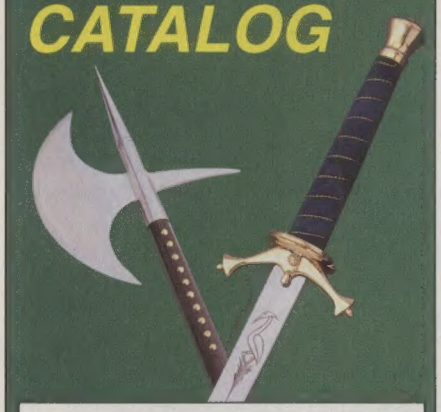

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KYLE ANDERSON would like to thank *Realms of Fantasy* for the opportunity to contribute to this most excellent magazine. After almost a decade of working as an art director and digital artist in the computer game industry, he is currently freelancing on a variety of exciting projects, producing digital cover illustrations for fantasy novels, magazines, and fantasy game products. Feel free to drop by his Web site *www.kyleanderson.com* for more artwork and contact information.

WEB BRYANT was one of the founders of USA TODAY, and is currently a senior illustrator there. His freelance work appears in numerous publications, and his paintings can be seen at Row House Gallery in Suburban Cincinnati, or online at *www.Rowhouse.com.*

LILLIAN STEWART CARL writes science fiction, fantasy, mystery, and romance, often all at the same time—and always with historical underpinnings. She's published eight novels, a dozen short stories, and a collection including most of those stories plus a new one. An audio book is also available. More stories and novels will be published in the next couple of years. She has lived for many years in North Texas, in a book-lined cloister cleverly disguised as a tract house. Therefore she's developed a passion for mountains and seacoasts, especially the ones in Scotland. She's also traveled in Europe, the Middle East, and India. She has a husband, two sons, and an assortment of houseplants she views as rentals—her thumbs are ink-stained, not green. When she's looking for an excuse not to work she knits and needlepoints, reads, and listens to music, especially Scottish rock 'n' reel. Lillian is a member of SFWA, Sisters in Crime, Novelists Inc., and the Author's Guild. Her Web site is *www.lilianstewartcarl.com.*

ERIC DINYER has worked as an artist/illustrator in the entertainment, music, and publishing industries for over 10 years. His clients include Time-Warner Books, *US News & World Report, Newsweek,* and Starwave Corporation, for whom he designed interfaces for Sting's interactive CD-ROM, "All This Time." Eric is the recipient of the Silver Medal and a member of the Society of Illustrators NYC and has consistently appeared in the *Arts Illustration Annual* since 1984. His work has been extensively profiled in *Communication Arts* and *Graphis* magazines. In 1997 he joined forces with designer David Descher to form Dreamless Studios; their Web site is at *www.dreamless.com.*

SCOTT GRIMANDO has been illustrating books, magazines, and video games for the past 13 years. He's been featured in *Heavy Metal* magazine and *The Spectrum* annual, and regularly works with Berkley Publishing and Disney. Scott recently launched *www.grimstudios.com,* a modern art studio whose goal is to offer his clients a comprehensive solution, including photography and 3-D design.

PAUL MELKO's fiction has appeared in *Terra Incognita, Talebones,* as well as other magazines that begin with the letter *T.* "The Burning Man" was the very first story worked over at his writers' workshop, The Semi-Omniscients. Clearly, they do a good job. Paul lives in the suburbs of Chicago with his beautiful wife and two adorable children, where he works as an IT consultant.

BRIAN PLANTE is a native New Yorker, now making his home in North Carolina with his wife and two daughters. By day he makes his living as a computer systems specialist at a major bank. His work has appeared in *Analog, Amazing Stories, Absolute Magnitide,* and the anthology *The Bones of the World.* Visit his Web site at *www.sff.net/people/Brian_Plante/.*

STEVEN POPKES lives in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, where, with the help of his wife and four-year-old son, he is attempting to build a farm on two acres of land. His stories have appeared in *Asimov's* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction.* This is his second story in *Realms of Fantasy.* "The Color of Winter" was a Nebula finalist and he was co-author on the *Future Boston* anthology. He has been a house builder, a whitewater rafting guide, a morgue technician, conservation agent, and a researcher on the neurophysiology of dogs.

CATHERINE WELLS has five SF novels to her credit, including *Beyond the Gates* (Roc Books, 1999) and *Mother Grimm* (Roc Books), a 1997 finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award. Catherine grew up in North Dakota and moved to Tucson, AZ, in 1982. She holds a bachelor of arts in Theater from Jamestown College (Jamestown, ND) and a masters in Library Science from the University of Arizona. She is a playwright as well as a novelist, with numerous productions to her credit. She and her husband are empty-nesters (yay! yay!) except for their aging Dalmation. Check out her home page at *www.sff.net/people/catherine-wells.* She loves to hear from fans!

JANE YOLEN spends half her year in Scotland where she goes from Pictish stone to Pictish stone fascinated by the stories they have to tell. The other half she lives in Western Massachusetts. She writes in both places, though her vocabularies seem different in each. Heading toward her 300th book ("Actually," she says, "I am somewhere in the mid-200s but have lost count") she is a two-time Nebula winner, a three-time Mythpoeic Award winner, a World Fantasy Award winner, and her children's books have won the Caldecott, the Golden Kite, the Jewish Book Award, the Christopher Medal (twice), and a whole host of state awards.

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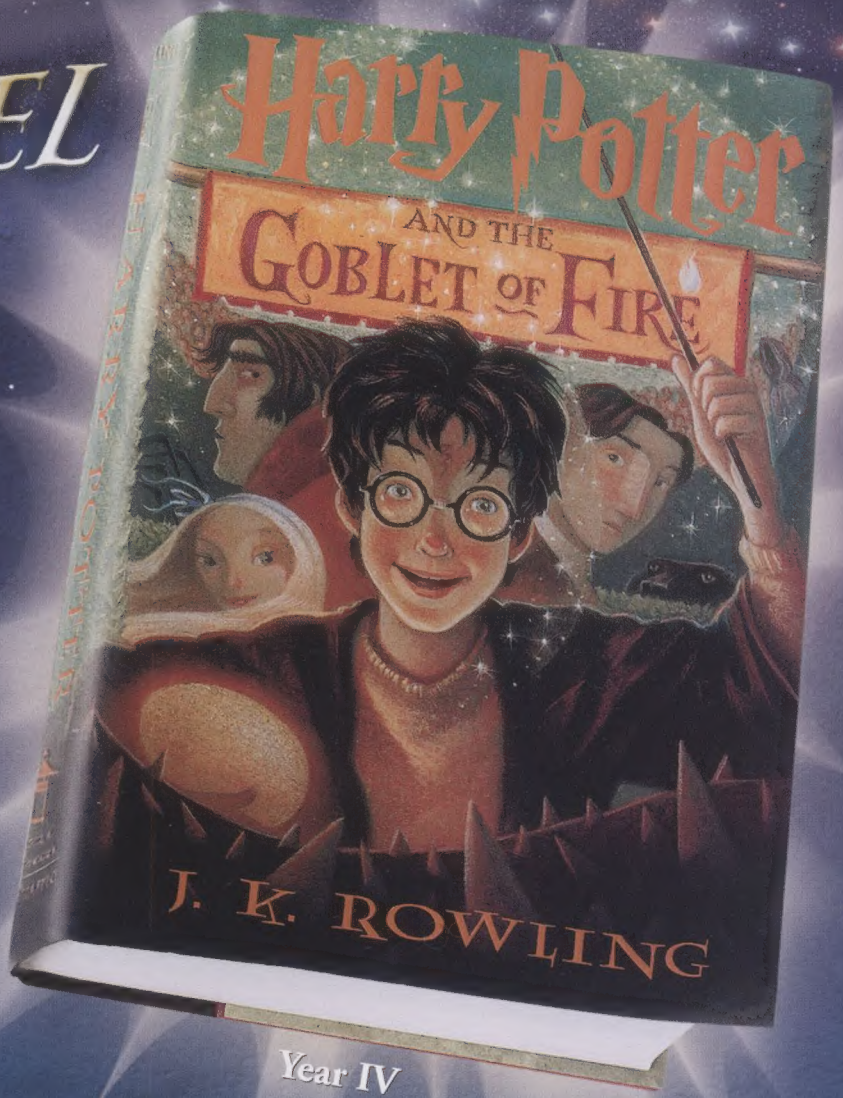

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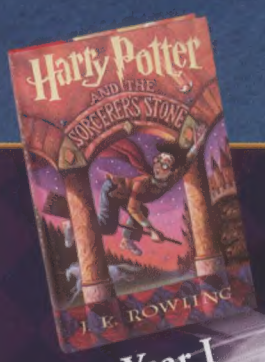

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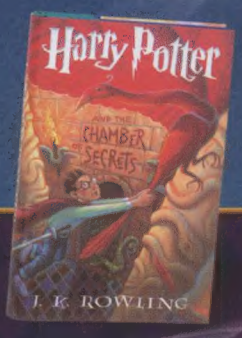

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